



Networking Guide

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A service for MIT Sloan Alumni

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"The only security nowadays lies in an individual's ability to adapt. Networking is the stuff of adaptation."

Networking is a skill that must be learned and practical. It comes naturally to very few people. But once mastered, it can enable virtual career management, if not provide lasting job security.

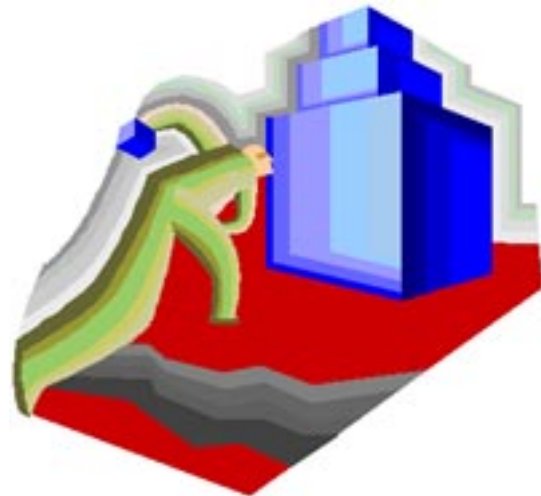
A job search campaign is waged in two distinct "markets"--the visible market of published job openings (advertisements, executive search listings, and data-bases), and the invisible market of unexpressed (and often undefined) career opportunities. Whereas an effective campaign covers both markets, it is the *invisible* market which consistently outperforms the *visible* market by 3 to 1, in terms of "source of job landed" by executives and professionals.

The primary activity in the process of uncovering the invisible job market is networking: that is, developing relationships with business contacts that ultimately lead to desirable career opportunities. It engages others to help the job seeker find his or her right new opportunity. As such, it taps into the natural desire to help others.

The purpose of networking is to uncover hidden job opportunities. But the process itself is indirect. Directly asking contacts if they have an appropriate job opening, or if they know of one simply does not work--especially nowadays. In fact, successful networkers make it clear at the outset that they do not expect that the contact has or even knows of an appropriate job opening. This approach makes it far more likely that the job seeker's short-term objectives will be met. They are as follows:

- 1. To gather information, ideas, and feedback**
- 2. To broaden/deepen exposure**
- 3. To gain referrals to further contacts**

Networking is far more effectively carried out in person than by telephone or by mail. Telephoning and letter-writing support networking with introductions, establishing and confirming face-to-face meetings, following up the leads that were gained, and--of utmost importance--thanking the person in writing for his or her assistance.



Really effective communications always leave the door open for future contact.

While networking is highly productive and rewarding, it is also highly demanding of job seekers. It challenges one's creativity, initiative, resourcefulness, and persistence. It requires nothing short of excellence in communication--both written and oral. In many ways, it's quite similar to earning an advanced degree--job seekers better have done their homework and prepared themselves for presentation.

Remember . . .

EVERYTHING YOU DO IN YOUR JOB SEARCH WILL BE JUDGED BY OTHERS AS YOUR ABSOLUTE, ON-PURPOSE BEST. SO MAKE IT YOUR BEST!

Become a student of the networking *process*. What follows will help your networking be as productive as it has been for others. Add your own and your associates' techniques that you find effective. Develop your skills as a keen observer of your own networking performance. Learn to read the signals you get from referral contacts. Solicit candid feedback from individuals whom you respect.

Networking is planned, organized, disciplined, and exhausting, especially for introverts. That's the bad news

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--the good news is that networking activity will productively harness all the proactive energy that you can muster. It is a sure-fire antidote to the frustrations of joblessness.

And when you are all done, happily engaged in your new opportunity, you owe it to all those referral contacts who helped you through the transition--and to yourself--to write them each a closure letter. Advise them of your new challenges, thank them for their help, and offer to reciprocate in whatever way they may ask of you in the future.

And mean it!

The single most important lesson that most job seekers learn in the course of their transition is that a healthy, active network is the most valuable--and often most neglected--asset a professional can have in today's market. Cultivate and harvest it well. Then fertilize it and keep it leafy green for the next time you get hungry. □

How to Begin

Start organizing your networking activity on day one--or day minus 60 and counting. Note that it is extremely difficult to mount a high-caliber networking campaign before you have declared--or been made--to be actively job seeking. The web you'd weave is altogether too tangled. Wait until you can be forthright and positive about leaving your last job and enthusiastic and positive about your future prospects.

Do not rush right out and flail away at your precious network before you've had a chance to line up your ducks. Remember...

"HE WHO DRAWS WITH HALF-COCKED GUN SHOTS SELF IN FOOT!"

Begin your networking by first developing lists of people, classified by the nature of their relationship to your job search. These should include:

List of References. At least 5, usually not more than 10.

References are those individuals who know you professionally and who can vouch for your competence, style, and character. The list should include your last two bosses, a peer, a couple of customers (or several if a sales/marketing role), a vendor/supplier of goods or services (e.g., for financial or chief officers: a banker, auditor, attorney), an appropriate mix of subordinates, and someone from your prior company.

References do not have to be employed by the same company where you originally had contact with them. On the contrary, often a reference who has moved onto a different position can be a far more effective reference--no axe to grind, a better perspective, added credibility. References can and will usually be excellent referral connects and even advocates. Treat them with extreme TLC throughout the process.



List of Advocates. At least 10, usually 25 to 30.

Advocates are those professional and personal contacts who will go out of their way to help you, and who will take a proactive interest in your campaign. They are your auxiliary eyes, ears, and antennae. Turn them on and tune them up.

Let your advocates know your situation right away, even if you are not ready to meet with them and pursue your interests. Usually a simple letter, worded informally in much the same manner as you would talk to them, works well. Put them on notice that you're going to be out there looking, and that as soon as you "get your act together" they'll be hearing from you. Ask them in the meantime to keep tuned to the market and let you know of anything that shows up on their screen that you should pursue. When you have your resume finalized, get together and start networking with them in earnest.

Advocates are the few people in the course of your networking to whom you can probably come back a second or even a third time. So it behooves you to stay in close contact with them. Follow up every ten days or so with a phone call, a breakfast, a note. Mix it up, but work at it. During the course of your networking, you may well find that some rather unlikely people become advocates for you. Don't be surprised. Try to replicate and reciprocate.

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List of Contacts. At least 50, usually 100 to 200.

Primary contacts are the nucleus of networking. They can be your best assets. They will range back to graduate school or to college, if not to childhood. They will be former coworkers, subordinates, bosses, customers, consultants, suppliers, teachers, coaches, teammates, and, yes, relatives. The only test is whether they:

1. **Remember you and your work**
2. **Can be persuaded to see you**
3. **Are in a position to help you meet the near-term networking objectives cited above**

As you develop your list, treat it as an ongoing master list. As names occur to you, capture them on your list and then research their whereabouts and situation. It often happens that one name brings to mind another and the list grows by batches. Don't bog down the free association with too much detail. Be expansive.

In prioritizing contacts, there is a trade-off between the status/importance of the contact versus the substance of your relationship. Usually, initial networking contacts are within one organizational level above or below you. Further out is a reach, requires extra effort, and may be a waste of time for both parties.

Whether to make initial contact with people on this list by telephone or by letter is a judgment call, with the trade-off as above. Put yourself in the other person's shoes. How would you be impacted by a phone call out of the blue just before the Annual Meeting? A letter is not as powerful or as informal as a phone call, but is less preemptive. Less disruptive. Also consider your own communication abilities, written vs. oral. When in doubt, do what you will actually do! For many people can get awfully heavy. It's often far easier to put off making a phone call than mailing a letter.

Develop a loose format for networking letters to contacts. The first paragraph re-introduces yourself, establishes your present situation, and asks for his or her help. Then take two paragraphs to set forth what you want to do and why you think you are qualified. Finally, ask for a brief meeting to explore your interests further. Be sure to follow up!

Remember . . .

"IN YOUR JOB SEARCH YOU ARE JUDGED BY WHAT YOU DO--AND BY WHAT YOU DO NOT DO"

Errors of omission are far more likely to slip past you and haunt you than are errors of commission. Do what needs doing. As the ad says, "Just Do It!"

List of Targets. At least 6 initially, usually grows to 25 or 40.

Targets are those people (or companies or industries) whom you have identified as attractive and appropriate referral contacts but with whom you have no contact, or *entree*. The source of their names can range from sophisticated databases, to general industry knowledge, to hearsay, to library research, to monitoring the business press, to casual conversations on the commuter train, to off the top of your head. The important thing is to track them.

People are often tempted, in a hard-fought search, to use a lot of blind, direct mailings to "names" they've gotten of lists or databases. The response rate is abysmal, on the order of 1 percent, even if you have a well-tested, zinger of a letter. In most cases, you are far better off taking a targeted approach via networking.

In a networking meeting, it helps greatly to have three or four "targets" to try out on your networkee, if he or she is coming up blank. It also serves to calibrate the networkee as to the level, function, industry, and contacts that you seek. It suggests that you have done your homework, and are not expecting the contact to do all the thinking.

Strong use of network targets is a major contributor to success in changing career direction, whether it is industry, function, or location. For a long-distance campaign--if you are intent on relocating out-of-state to an area where you have a weak natural network--targeted networking is by far your most powerful approach.

In case of a highly desirable target, go into overkill on your research. Read the financial reporting that is public; research any articles where he or she is quoted. In short, put together as complete a picture of the person as you can. It will come across very favorably. Get more than one or two referrals, if possible in a timely way. Triangulate.

Targeted networking can work extremely well in responding to an advertisement for a position for which you are an A-1 candidate. It takes a lot more effort but can differentiate you powerfully from the rest of the pack. Target the likely decision-maker (usually the prospective boss) and work your network to at least get in telephone contact. If possible, hand-carry your resume and cover letter: put a face to the voice. Compete freely. ☐

Turning the Crank

In general, start with your best contacts as a nucleus and work outward. Tap into your references first. Get their reaction to your resume and then solicit any ideas they may have for you.

Then, get a letter off to your advocates. Set aside some time early on to meet with them. You can use their feedback and encouragement. You may want to adjust your approach after these early contacts.

Develop a focused set of career objectives before going out to your primary contact network. You will need to articulate clearly and enthusiastically your chosen course, so the more you can do to focus it, the better. The objectives should include function, industry level and profile of an organization, and why--and how--you believe you can help.

Given your objectives, prioritize your primary contacts. Take the obvious ones first. Establish a sustainable pace among those whom feel comfortable with or who have a clear connection to your objectives. Keep track of your activity. Develop a system of monitoring your progress against your plan. Be realistic; don't bite off more than is practical. Take into account seasonality--of your industry or your locale. Summer months are tough networking. Either side of holidays is surprisingly good.

The most important roadblock to networking is that, for the networkee, it is entirely voluntary, uncompensated, and, at its worst, an abject waste of time. Therefore, the networker must do whatever he or she possibly can to make it not



only as benign but also as beneficial as possible to the networkee. Remember ...

"NETWORKING THAT IS A ONE-WAY STREET IS A DEAD END"

Successful networkers find ways to deliver a "benefit" to the referrals they contact. These are often intangible, to be sure, but valuable, nonetheless. Usually the benefit takes the form of information, either specific (but non-confidential) about an industry, product, or service that the networkee has an interest in, or perhaps a consensus of trends the networker is finding in the industry. □

The Networking Meeting

It is far easier to get in to see someone if you are only going to take 20 minutes or so. However, getting anything accomplished in that time frame demands a tight agenda. It can be done--and must be done if that was promised at the outset.

- 1 minute: Introduce yourself, disarm about expecting a job lead, state your purpose.
- 2 minutes: Give an overview of your career: where you've been, where you're going.
- 10 minutes: Build rapport, make connection with the networkee's career, industry.

- 4 minutes: Ask for referrals, help with targets, get sense of the relationships/style.
- 2 minutes: Summarize, thank, and exit.

After every networking meeting, write a brief but gracious thank-you note, referencing the particular people you will be contacting. Get it in the mail that day. If appropriate, include an article or other item of interest that may have come up during your meeting. Keep the contact alive. When you have made dates with or have seen the new contacts, send the networkee a note thanking him or her again and updating them on the results. It is rare that you can go back a second time, but a simple note can help raise the odds. □

Follow-up

Upon getting the referral, start the process of contacting the people to whom you have been referred. Usually you will initiate the contact with a letter much like the networking letter for primary contacts (above). However, with subsequent contacts you should start the letter off with specific mention of the person who referred you and why you (both) believe it makes sense to meet. The rest follows very closely. Again, indicate that you will call for an appointment. And of course, you do.

The networking letter greatly helps pave the way for your phone call, especially where there is a "gatekeeper" on the receiving end, whose job it is to keep the boss free of just such distractions. The letter prepares the networker for the communications that will ensue.

Recognize that it takes an average of five dialings to reach the typical executive. After the third message on voicemail, most people change over to a polite note.

It is far easier to get an appointment two or three weeks hence than during this week. Suggest a date well in the future. It may seem lackadaisical, but your hit rate will be better. If the date is more than a week away, send a confirming letter a week ahead of the appointment. If you must cancel, give plenty of notice. If the target cancels, try to reschedule. Don't let it throw you--other priorities are very real and have nothing to do with you.

A full-time job search requires at least five networking meetings per week, but the closer you can get to ten per week the demonstrably faster you will uncover that right next opportunity. Note the dynamics: there is about a three-week delay from receiving the referral to having the meeting. If the third week of October falls short of the five meetings, then your groundwork in the last week of September must have been below par!



Notice that not much has been said about whether or not to include resumes with networking letters or where they come in to the networking process. That too is a judgment call. In most cases where you will be following up a letter with a phone call and/or a meeting, it is not appropriate to include a resume with the letter. Think of it as a piece of sales literature to be handed out at the close of the meeting, or sent with a follow-up letter. Or send it as a last-ditch effort to those who refuse to see you. It is the preparation of the resume that is crucial to the networking process--the focused objectives and succinct tallying of achievements--not the document itself. □

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