

NETWORKING – A LIFETIME CAREER TACTIC

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Many people in job search realize late that they should have networked. Technical people, low key managers and executives listen up. You need to use your existing network now and build you network this minute! You can't use if, and or buts. No excuses, please. Every person and every jobseeker carries some level of financial concern during a career transition. So talking to people you don't know better happen and happen fast or you risk delays in your search. But it shouldn't really start or end at the job search level. It's a career life lesson reality.

Let's talk about what proper job search networking is not: It's not a stern set of rules or patterns that everyone must follow nor should it be viewed as necessary evil so that you can get something from someone. You really need a positive, giving attitude to do it right. That's hard when you are searching for a job because everything seems to revolve around me, me, me and my needs. You must change your attitude fast.

Yet there remain no perfect behaviors of a networker only positive behavioral habits. It's not or should never be perceived as just a self-serving proposition and should occur throughout your career life. It certainly isn't something that is an exact science; it's more of an art where you continually look to serve and improve your communication with others, even those who may not directly benefit you. It is not always fun but it can be if you want it to be.

For most people that reach an executive level in their respective fields they did not do it alone. How did the turtle get on the fencepost? The turtle didn't do it alone. The myth of the self-made man or woman often is just that - a myth. Your contacts, mentors, work ethic and communication skills helped you innovate, drive revenue and reduce costs. Many folks assisted you in this process. Recognizing this natural network and working with these set of folks will be your first duty.

Greg Postune, a director of finance at a large technical company found his current position through his own natural network. "Even though I did not know one of the executives that first called me into the interview," says Mr. Postune. "He recognized me from an industry conference list from five years prior. So when he saw that I was looking, he immediately called me." In fact, his resume was one of 245 that the company received after a posting on one regional search site. "I don't know exactly what happened but they key-word searched and my contact found me."

Chance opportunities to network and obtain an offer do happen. That's part of the reason that you should network for life. Once anyone takes a position they get so entrenched in learning, working and executing the gameplan they forget. It's human nature. We tell them to enroll in a seed planting program. Each placed executive who decides to do so works in what should be called a Seed Planting Program. It's aftercare so to speak for those of us who have obtained employment or completed our outplacement program. We encourage them to plant seeds, make contacts, build referrals and follow up with at least five folks a month to maintain relationships. Some of our executives have a database of over 2000 folks. When they started with us they could only name a hundred or so people. Effective networking is relationship building.

Effective networking works best when the focus remains on win-win. How many organizations are available to join and participate in locally, regionally and nationally that will allow you to access peers and decision-makers and, quite possibly, positively impact your business? Would you be willing to give a lot before you receive? Good behavioral habits like giving without the expectation of immediate payback will leave the right impression with folks. This would seem to be understood but it is not. The reputation of Ellen Sanson, who served in multiple manufacturing turnaround specialist roles, really seemed to be negative. "If you wanted someone to cut your company and return it to profitability," says Ms. Sanson, "I

was the one to do it. As a former military person I guess I got the take no prisoners reputation. This did not help me when I wanted to shift careers and change things." Manufacturing areas especially in his area of specialty - textiles - took such a beating that even he found himself cut out of his multi-year, six figure plus positions. Most jobs had gone to Mexico or China.

"I don't want to make light of it," says Ms. Sanson. "For me though I almost had to be rehabilitated. You could call it that - rehab. I had to rehab my reputation and focus on building not tearing down." To build his contact base as a production manager out of the textile industry required new training and a new approach to others. He paid for and received ISO and other training out of pocket over about a year span.

According to Ms. Sanson, "I had to learn how to win friends, influence people and take a less than hard line approach as well." After a year of bridge jobs at less than \$50,000 a year, he had built such a strong referral base and positive image through networking and volunteering, that he was asked by a small business to serve in a Vice President of Production role. His initial contact with the new employer came through his work with Habitat for Humanity. "Who knew," says Ms. Sanson. "I sure wouldn't have joined this organization had I not gone through the downsizing."

Many in executive or all levels of search use professional networks too. Personal and professional networking allows people to make professional, job oriented contacts quickly and directly. Good advice for professional, job search networkers remains extensive. One tip to keep in mind with any professional paid or non-paid job search network is to always look for ways that your contacts, skill set and advice can benefit others. That's the right frame of mind to carry into any networking situation. Ask, yourself - how many people will be better off because I joined this organization?

Many executives and jobseekers might be surprised at how poor communication skills damage proper networking. Over the years and on the executive level, there have been those like James Paulson, a top sales executive in the software industry. "I just thought it went without saying that you treat everyone first class," she says. "That's what I did but that's not what everyone does. In fact one of my old bosses would blow past and not give the time of day to a secretary or worker that wasn't someone he thought we could close." People talk. "We lost two multi-million dollar deals in the last year of my employment." The reason given to Mr. Paulson by the CEO? "If your boss can't treat my secretary with class then that's an example of how your firm will treat us. Jenna, it's not your fault but that kind of did the deal in because it was so close."

The old saying could go that the same people you go past on the way up will be the same folks you see on the way down. "Ironically," says Mr. Paulson, "it was that very secretary and CEO from a failed deal with my old company who referred me to my new company." She now earns 20% more and deals with a management environment that does not ignore the details. Mr. Paulson states: "The one thing I have learned in career transition and in business is that everyone has ears, is significant and is your potential network."

That's a good life and career lesson learned.

Psychologists, psychiatrists and neurosurgeons might tell you or agree on at least a few things. Perhaps they could agree that your brain is a complicated, interconnected system that is wired to make you who you are. It's so complicated in fact that one person's unique wiring does not exactly match any other person's wires or pathways. So if we can all agree on this premise then why do many jobseekers at the all levels try to set up their network like anyone else. Your network needs to be knotted, secured, interconnected and interrelated to meet your goals and values. Do it in your personal, unique way and you will have a network for life.

Job-search networks work but networking in general is key. You can obtain job listings, company information and other resources through the public domain. Use the tools of this network and really put it

to work. It's not the only tool in the toolbox out there for you as an executive. Just don't forget about the seeds you plant with every person, every recruiter, every contact and everybody you meet.

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In 2004, Mr. O'Connor became the first private practice Certified Federal Job Search Trainer (CFJST) in North Carolina. He is also a Certified Electronic Career Coach (CECC). With a unique fiction writing pedigree with fiction publications as well, he obtained a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Bowling Green State University. With over 14 years experience in professional career transition, resume writing and career coaching, O'Connor applies his considerable job market expertise to career transitioners nationally.

He has been featured recently (May 2003 and May 2004 feature) in the Raleigh News & Observer, Resume Writers Digest, The Gladiator, Execunet, Career Masters Institute Monthly Newsletter, Monster Career News and other national publications such as JIST. Additionally his diversified experience includes serving as a college professor.