

MAKING NETWORKING EASIER FOR JOB SEEKERS: A GUIDE

Joy Gould, Rooshey Hasnain, Jennifer Bose, and John Butterworth

INTRODUCTION

Networking is one of the most effective ways to find satisfying employment. Studies conducted by Dean Brake Morin (2004) on career transitions consistently showed that over 60% of job seekers find new jobs through networking. However, not everyone is skilled at networking, or even willing to try it.

People are often uncomfortable networking, even when they are told what an effective tool it is. Fear of the unknown, cultural differences, family concerns about safety, and barriers related to disability all contribute to this reluctance. This brief addresses some common reasons that people may not be comfortable networking and provides some possible solutions. It is geared toward anyone—including job developers, case managers, teachers, career counselors, friends, and family members—who is helping someone they know to find a job.

NETWORKING: THE REAL DEFINITION

Almost all of us have people that we turn to for professional advice and support. Sometimes these are people we've known all our lives, and sometimes they are new acquaintances. Nevertheless, all people make connections at one time or another to find jobs and grow in their careers. This is what networking is all about.

People network in different ways. In some cultures, networking with immediate community members such as friends, family, and neighbors comes naturally. In others, it is more appropriate to reach out to a formal network involving professional organizations and business contacts. Even within one culture, people can hold different ideas about what styles of networking are useful and appropriate.

Here are some common barriers to effective networking, and some ways to overcome them.

OVERCOMING THE FEAR FACTOR

Many people find the process of networking awkward. They may not be sure how to start, they may be afraid of asking the wrong questions, or they may not be comfortable reaching out to strangers or newer acquaintances.

SOLUTION: The best way to get started is to help the job seekers you work with come up with a networking plan.

► **STEP ONE:** Generate a list of people to network with. This list could include people in formal or informal networks. If a job seeker is very nervous about speaking to strangers, have him or her start with a friendly acquaintance. Remind the job seeker that people are often willing to help by talking about their job, telling how they got onto their current career path, and offering suggestions for breaking into their field.

► **STEP TWO:** Once the job seeker has created a list of people to contact, help him or her write down what to say. Start by creating an introduction script. The script should include some positive attributes of the job seeker, what type of job he or she wants, and reasons for speaking to each contact. Then create a list of possible questions to ask. These could include:

“Tell me the best part of your job.”

“Do you have any suggestions for me about the best ways to look for a job?”

“Would you mind reading my resume and giving me some feedback?”

- ▶ **STEP THREE:** To help job seekers get comfortable with networking, do a roleplay. Have the job seeker practice networking questions with you, a friend, or a family member.

By creating a plan, writing a list of questions, and practicing, job seekers can feel more confident about networking techniques.

LEARNING THE JOB-SEARCH PROCESS

It is difficult to find a job, and the process may require many steps. A person just starting out may not know all the steps involved in the job-search process. People with disabilities, in the past, may not have been in control of their own job-search efforts. Job developers may have set them up with interviews, or they may not have any prior work experience. Because networking involves speaking to many different people, without seeing tangible results right away, not all job seekers can see how it will help them find a job.

SOLUTION: Put the job seeker in control of the process. Help him or her come up with a list of people to speak to about the job search. Then discuss how each person may be able to help. People on the list may be able to review resumes, practice interview questions, or provide general career advice. Help the job seeker create a schedule for approaching people, and discuss polite ways to ask for assistance. Remind the job seeker that each person they connect with brings them one step closer to a job.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE

In order to network effectively, job seekers must be able to speak positively about what they can offer to an employer. This is not easy for everyone. People with limited work histories may not know that the skills they have developed at home or at school can be useful in the workplace. Other people may be naturally anxious or shy. People from a variety of cultures may be afraid of seeming boastful or

showing too much pride. In short, for many reasons, some people do not know how to speak positively about themselves.

SOLUTION: Help job seekers understand the difference between “bragging” and putting their best foot forward. Suggest that they think of networking as making a commercial about their talents. Remind them that they have something special to offer employers and that they need to get the word out.

Every person has particular traits or skills that help them stand out. Have the job seeker ask people who know him or her well to help identify those talents. Use what they say to make a list of positive things to tell an employer. Traits such as punctuality, being a good team player, and having a strong work ethic can be demonstrated in a variety of ways. A person does not need to have a work history to be able to demonstrate success. Where has he or she excelled? Was it in school, on a team, or in a volunteer position?

Once the job seeker has a list of positive traits and skills, work together to add specific examples. For instance:

“I am a people person. I helped my classmates raise money for our school trip by selling chocolate bars door to door.”

“I am a fast learner. I learned word-processing software in a week by using the tutorial.”

By hearing positive things from people around them and listing specific examples of things they do well, job seekers will gain confidence. As they network, they will become more comfortable speaking positively about themselves.

ADDRESSING FAMILY CONCERNS

Family members can be very helpful in the networking and job-search process. Many people find jobs through family connections. For some job seekers who have disabilities, however, family

members can be a barrier. The family may want to protect the job seeker, have concerns about him or her working in an unfamiliar setting, or be worried about him or her speaking to strangers.

SOLUTION: Involve the family in the job search. Meet with them for an informal brainstorming session. During this session, allow family members to voice their concerns while keeping the focus on the career goals of the job seeker. Come up with strategies that will work for that particular job seeker. If family members seem overprotective, for instance, encourage them to come up with a list of people in their own networks that they know and feel comfortable with. This gives the job seeker more connections to positive people they can trust. Again, be sensitive to cultural differences.

CULTURAL ISSUES

In some cultures, unemployment and disability are perceived as sources of shame. It might not be seen as appropriate to network in the family circle.

SOLUTION: Use formal networking strategies such as visiting a One-Stop Career Center, going to job fairs, and relying on professional contacts such as job developers, caseworkers, therapists, and former co-workers. By using this more formal approach, the family will be less involved, but the process may also be viewed as more professional and thus more acceptable.

BUILDING A NETWORK

Some people have a broader network than others. A recent immigrant or someone new to the area may need to build a network. This is also true for people who are dealing with addiction or recovery issues. Some job seekers may need help to establish new connections.

SOLUTION: A great way to network, learn about a career, and make connections with

employers is to go on informational interviews. An informational interview gives a job seeker the chance to speak with someone who works in an interesting field. Unlike a traditional interview, the goal of the informational interview is to gather information—not to land a job. This means that there is less pressure on the job seeker, who will have the opportunity to relax and ask questions freely.

Many people are willing to share their experiences with someone who is interested. Formal and informal networks can be used to set up an informational interview. Because the job seeker is not asking to be hired, it is a more relaxed way to make a connection within a company.

CONCLUSION

Like all activities, networking gets easier and better with practice. By using the connections they already have and establishing new ones, job seekers can make quicker progress toward finding fulfilling jobs.

Informational Interview Questions

- Can you tell me more about this company?
- What do you do at this company?
- What do you like most about your job? What is challenging about it?
- What type of education or training is needed to do this type of work?
- How did you get your position?
- Would you look at my resume and give me feedback?
- Is there anyone else you can put me in touch with so that I can learn more about this field?

RESOURCES—WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

(available at www.communityinclusion.org)

Networking: Your Guide to an Effective Job Search.
Tools for Inclusion, Issue No. 7.

Job Networking in Diverse Communities.
Research to Practice, Issue No. 37.

*Making Dreams a Reality: Using Personal Networks to
Achieve Goals as You Prepare to Leave High School.*
Tools for Inclusion, Issue No. 15.

*Teaching Networking Skills: Paving a Way to Jobs and
Careers (teaching manual).*



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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Melanie Jordan
Institute for Community Inclusion
University of Massachusetts Boston
100 Morrissey Boulevard
Boston, Massachusetts 02125
(617) 287-4327 (voice)
(617) 287-4350 (TTY)
melanie.jordan@umb.edu

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