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## **Networking Tips**

### **Introduction**

In 1940, Webster recorded the definition of networking as “the exchange of information or services among individuals, groups, or institutions”. Although this definition certainly holds true today – networking in its simplest form is the exchange of information – so-called “power networking” has taken this process to a new height. And for both job search and ongoing career management purposes, networking can and should play a pivotal role.

Now more than simply exchanging information, networking is the *art* of creating, maintaining, and nurturing *relationships*. It is an *art* rather than a science; many styles and techniques of networking can be effective, but the best networkers are those for whom networking is a natural process. That isn't to say that all effective networkers have a natural or innate ability to do this. Rather, the seasoned networker makes a conscious commitment in order to establish a level of comfort that lets networking *appear* natural to those around him/her. In other words, anyone can learn to be an effective and compelling networker if he/she chooses to do so. A seasoned networker is always attuned to his/her surroundings or environment and becomes a keen observer, an active listener, and an interested participant in appropriate discussions.

### ***Why Network?***

Once mastered, networking can become one of the easiest and quickest forms of research. A seasoned networker often gains valuable information not available in print. This enhances one's effectiveness, perspective, and knowledge, as well as improving one's self-confidence and awareness. Specifically, networking can be used for:

- Information gathering
- Advice
- Psychological and emotional support
- Strategy and tactics

- Job leads – whether or not you are actively looking
- Professional development
- On-going career management
- Exposure
- Obtaining referrals
- Gaining a mentor

## **Getting Started**

Networking can be a scary endeavor for people, particularly in the context of a job search. Yet remember, most people network regularly without realizing that is what they are doing. For example, many people rely on friends, colleagues, family, etc. for ideas, information, and referrals about very basic things such as what movie to see, where to eat Thai food, which dentist or doctor's office is most appropriate for you, and so on. These are simple forms of networking which typically come quite naturally to most of us. Even when choosing which business schools to apply to, you probably did a bit of research and discussed this with a few people whose opinions you trust and respect. This is networking. And there is no reason to feel less comfortable about networking for a job than for any other kind of information. Besides, networking works! Why? Because:

- People like to help others, especially when there is a common connection such as a school, former colleague, friend, etc.
- People are uncertain about their own futures and recognize they may need to network with you at some point down the road.
- People like to be considered "experts" in their chosen fields. It can be flattering to be asked for advice and counsel.
- Recruiting is an expensive and time-consuming process. Networking is not.
- Individuals typically trust a referral that comes from one of their proven employees.
- Networking benefits all – not just the job seeker.
- It gets you "in the loop" and closer to the decision-makers – in a no-risk way for both you and the decision-makers. Networking is a highly recognized and accepted form of finding management talent.
- Most people agree that networking is important, valuable, and necessary – yet few feel they do it well or consistently enough. Your request to network can open doors for others and provide

opportunities for your contact to touch base with his/her own network.

So, networking works; now what? Basically, start by making a list of people you know. These can be friends, relatives, colleagues (current or former), alumni, professors, volunteer work, your children's teachers or coaches, etc. Everyone is a potential source of information and the more people you know, the greater your odds of finding the right opportunity. Prioritize your list in terms of the people who can hire you or make a referral to someone else who can hire you. If you are still researching what career paths to pursue, seek the people who can best provide insight into what it really means to do a particular job or follow a certain path. In all cases, you want to end each networking conversation with *at least one* additional contact or referral. This is how you expand your network beyond people you already know. And, the referral provides the introduction and the "connection" you need to open the door with someone you do not know. Similarly, although you may not actually know individuals from your undergraduate and SOM alumni lists, the connection to the schools creates the necessary entrée for you.

In addition to contacting the individuals on your list, consider other informal settings plus scheduled company presentations, SIG and SAG events, etc. as excellent opportunities for networking. Be on your guard at all times; often times, opportunities to network will present themselves when you least expect it. The key is to be prepared to seize the opportunity – and that is at least part of the reason why your Self Assessment is so important and your prepared 60-Second Commercial comes in handy! The beauty – and challenge – of networking is that it is immediate and proactive. You don't have to wait for a response to a letter or email; you ask a question and receive an answer. That also means that first impressions are critical and again, are made when you least expect. In social situations take care to present a good image and be ready to network at all times. Business school provides numerous opportunities for networking and meeting new people, often in very informal, seemingly benign settings. Be aware and be prepared!

Remember that your network is more than just a source of interesting job contacts. Those who know you may be able to provide insight into what you would be suited for, and can help steer you towards the "right" industry. Mentoring is another way to broaden and nurture your network. Get them interested in your professional

development and stay in touch with them regularly and informally. This can be particularly useful when you are not actively looking for a job.

Finally, set up a database or log of your contacts, the key points of information, and what you have gained from each person. Keeping good records not only lets you refresh your memory and revisit ideas, it also helps you maintain and nurture these relationships beyond this particular contact or job search. See the Networking Log online.

### ***Establishing and Managing the Networking Meeting***

Although it can be informal, networking does have a certain etiquette of which you should be aware.

- Always set the meeting at the convenience of the *contact*.
- Seek a face-to-face meeting whenever possible or practical. Never write when you can call and never call when you can meet in person. Meeting in person lets you present a good first impression and sometimes, meet other individuals in the organization who may be in a better position to help you.
- Always treat the administrative assistant with respect. He/she is often your initial point person in establishing contact with your target. Call him/her by name and establish a rapid rapport with him/her. It is always well worth your effort; administrative assistants carry more clout than their title suggests.
- Establish a clear objective for the meeting. What do you want to gain from this contact? Be specific.
- **Never ask a networking contact for a job.** This is a definite turn off! You are looking for advice, counsel, referrals – not a job. Clearly if a job lead comes out of the conversation you are well off, but that is *not* the main objective of this meeting.
- Thank the contact in advance for his/her time and thoughtful consideration.
- Write down the topics you want to discuss and/or the questions you want to ask.
- Do your homework up front. What do you know about this person, organization, job, etc.? Why has this person been referred to you?
- Prepare your 60-Second Commercial – and practice! This is a typical and excellent way to start the conversation.
- Arrive/make the call on time and stick to your agreed upon timeframe. Once your allotted time is up, acknowledge it and

check in with the individual. If the conversation is productive and you wish to continue it, ask the person if now is a good time or if he/she would prefer to set a time for follow up.

- Ask the individual if you can use his/her name in contacting the referrals.
- Keep your contacts abreast of your situation. Let them know what happens with the referrals they offer and thank them again. Tell them when you land the job. Basically, stay in touch.
- If someone suggests they will forward your resume to Human Resources, thank them first. Then you may ask for the name of that person so that you can follow up directly (now with another company person as a reference). Or, suggest that you are not ready to approach Human Resources at this time; you are just in the information-gathering phase.
- If someone tells you they'll pass your resume on to others or send a letter of introduction on your behalf (great!), ask for their names, titles, and contact information (particularly if they are outside this organization) so that you may follow up with them directly.
- Follow through! While first impressions are critical, so is your persistence and follow through.

Whether making the initial contact to establish the meeting by letter or telephone, you should always clearly define the purpose of your call/contact up front. State who referred you or what is your connection (e.g. you are an alumna/us of the same school) in the first few seconds. Describe who you are or what you hope to do using a modified form of your 60-Second Commercial. Then make a specific request to set a time to have this conversation, again in person or by phone and always at the convenience of the contact. Be specific about how much time you need. For example: "Would it be possible to set a time for a brief conversation (30 minutes) over the next few weeks?" Refer to the section on informational interviewing in the Letter Writing Tips Learning Guide found online on the CDO website.

### ***Making the Call: Networking by Telephone***

Networking by phone has its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, you can actually have a script in front of you and follow it carefully, checking things off as you go to ensure you cover all of your key points. It can also be convenient in letting you and your contact conduct the meeting/conversation anywhere.

Sometimes this lets you get an appointment more quickly if the contact is traveling. On the other hand, you miss the opportunities afforded by a face-to-face encounter, including being able to read body language or meeting additional people in the organization. Still, because of its expediency, you will likely find yourself doing much of your networking by phone. And, just because you are on the telephone does not mean you can come unprepared.

All of the above guidelines hold true whether on the phone or in person. It may be helpful to write out a script of your call so that you can practice in advance and until you are comfortable. (See also the Networking Script Learning Guide online on the CDO website.) Think ahead or brainstorm with a colleague about the possible objections or roadblocks you may encounter in making the contact and offer positive responses. A typical networking call follows this type of format:

- **Opening:** includes a thank you for taking the time to speak with you and your 60-second Commercial to describe whom you are.
- **Common Bond:** establishes who referred you or in what way you are connected. Try to build rapport as quickly and succinctly as possible.
- **Agenda:** restates the reason for your call and what – specifically – you are requesting. This is likely to be a reminder of the request you made in your initial or follow up letter.
- **Discussion or Q&A:** refers to your prepared list of questions, plus follow-up questions to probe some of the answers more deeply. Remember to listen actively and with oral affirmation since the other person cannot see your reaction or read your body language.
- **Commitment/Closure:** includes a check-in on the time to ensure you are not “overstaying your welcome” as well as a recap of the next steps you will take as a result of this conversation.
- **Follow-up:** is not a part of this initial conversation, of course, but will be critical to the success of your networking overall. Be sure to send a note of thanks as well as an update on your progress in pursuing the additional leads this person gave you.

### ***Making the Visit: Networking in Person***

A networking meeting is often called an “informational interview”. This interview is requested and conducted by the job seeker. Its sole purpose is to obtain information about an organization, industry, or

function or advice about your job search strategy and approach. It is not considered part of the traditional selection process; however, there are guidelines you can follow to enhance your effectiveness in this situation. Be sure to refer also to the Interviewing Learning Guide online on the CDO website. This document has more information about conducting these types of interviews.

- Whether established in writing or by phone, the networking meeting should be preceded by an introductory letter. You should confirm the meeting and establish your agenda. (See Letter Writing Tips Learning Guide online on the CDO website.) You may also enclose your resume by way of background for the individual.
- Be prepared to conduct the meeting. Do not expect to be interviewed.
- Dress, prepare, and present yourself as professional and polished as you would for a formal job interview. Remember that you are making an impression that has a direct bearing on the extent to which this contact will help you and/or introduce you to others.
- Networking or informational interviews do not replace extensive research. They supplement it.
- A follow-up thank you letter is appropriate and expected. If this is a referral, it is also appropriate to thank the referring individual.

### ***Handling Networking Events Effectively***

As part of your business school experience, you will have ample opportunities to practice, develop, and hone your networking skills. Here are some guidelines for getting the most out of these opportunities:

- **Prepare yourself for all events.** People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Find out who is attending. Identify 1-3 people you'd particularly like to meet and be prepared with some questions or "conversation starters" for them. These can cover anything from an interesting article you read to specific questions about the outlook for this person's industry.
- **Don't monopolize the contact.** Be creative and remember that you will have only a few minutes with this person. Know when to move on or just listen to the next person.
- **Enhance your communication and listening skills.** Connect with your listener by making an effort to *really* listen. Pause regularly to

allow time for reflection and a response. Be aware of bad habits (e.g. talking too much when you feel nervous).

- **Make a strong first impression** that never stops impressing others. Maintain proper eye contact. Move your hands away from your face and be aware of where your hands are. Holding a drink (even water or a soft drink) can be a good way to deal with nervous hands. Ease into the group or conversation after politely listening.
- **Keep business cards you receive in one pocket.** Put your own in the other. And, of course, remember which is which! This helps you to avoid pulling out the card of a competitor instead of your own card. Primarily, you don't want to have to fish for your own cards or walk around with a stack of received cards in one hand. Be sure to really look at the card and read it. This is particularly important in some cultures, so be aware of these differences.

### ***Getting Help***

The CDO staff, Internship Coaches (for first-years), and Business Writing Consultants are available to help you in all aspects of letter writing. In addition, there are numerous reference texts and samples on which you can draw; any of the above people (and the CDO website) can direct you to appropriate resources.