



Networking: Developing Your Professional Contacts

Networking is a term we hear commonly and it is one that we're told is important. But what is a non-technological network and why is it perhaps your most essential job search tool?

What is a network?

In its most simple terms, a network is a group of people who can help you to make connections. Your professional network consists of practitioners/professionals in your career field of interest or other people who have links to people who do.

The value of a network is that it provides access to information not readily available from print or online resources. Practitioners in a field can provide stories from the trenches: what their experiences have really been like, what they enjoy, what they find challenging, what they have personally found rewarding.

Practitioners can provide an insider's perspective on a particular organization: what's it really like to work there? They can help you surface trends about where the field might be evolving and what skills/knowledge base will prove useful, and provide information about job opportunities within the field and how to access them.

Establish Your Network

— it's easier than you might think

The first step in establishing your network is to determine who might already be in it. Your goal is to be as inclusive as possible—it's not just about what people know, but also who they know.

Start by making a list of people in your existing network. Be sure to include:

- Family
- Friends (and their friends and family)
- Classmates
- Faculty
- Teammates
- Coworkers
- Employers
- Acquaintances at the health club
- Anyone else you can think of

Don't rule people out because you think you know what and who they know. You may have always known someone in one particular way, but they may have information or contacts or access to these you never knew about. Consider discretely sharing your career "needs" with them and ask who they know who may be willing to speak with you on an informational basis.

Important:

Before you decide to initiate career conversations with co-workers and/or employers, think carefully. Will you put your job or working relationship in jeopardy if you let it be known that you're planning to move on?

Your existing network may yield professional contacts that will help you move your career forward - whether you are at the information/decision-making stage or ready to secure a position. But it might not. If that's the case you need to go outside your immediate network and make contact with people not known to you. These "outsiders" may include:

- Leaders in your field of interest
- People whose work you've read in professional publications
- People who hold similar jobs to the one you're hoping to secure
- Who else?

Networking



Networking, continued.

Why might potential contacts even consider speaking with you?

There are actually many reasons:

- Good will - it lets them return a favor to whoever referred you
- Ego – enjoy being identified as an expert in the field
- Curiosity about the academic program you're in – perhaps someone in their family is thinking of coming to RIC
- Might have an opening and this is a way to screen a potential candidate without formally scheduling an interview
- Might want to encourage people to enter this growing field – in which there are more positions than qualified candidates
- Expanding their own networks and you're a potential contact for them

How will you approach contacts?

If you are referred to an as-yet-to-be-developed contact by someone in your existing network, ask for their suggestion on how best to contact this new person and when. Can you use your current contact's name and say they encouraged you to connect?

If you are making contact without the benefit of a referral, it might be best to send an introductory letter letting them know that you would like to speak with them and why and that you will follow-up to ask if that is possible. You may choose to include a resume to provide background information.

Utilize Your Network

Once you have developed a core of contacts for your network, it's time to utilize these contacts to move your career forward.

First, be clear in your own mind how this professional contact may be of help to you.

Are you:

- Trying to learn more about a particular career field?
- Deciding in what environment you would prefer to work?
- Learning from an industry insider how to best access job openings in your career field of choice?
- Learning more about the organization your contact works for?
- Wanting to know the best strategies for applying to the organization your contact works for?

Once you know what you need to get out of the interaction, you can then determine if it makes more sense to meet with this person on a formal or informal basis.



Networking, continued.

Business etiquette suggests that you follow certain protocol that demonstrates consideration for your contact's schedule and time as well as professionalism.

- Request a modest amount of their time (~one half hour)
- Be flexible if they have to cancel and reschedule
- Prepare your questions in advance
- Follow-up with a thank you letter

If you are meeting with the person to explore a career field in greater depth, you'll want to:

- Be well-prepared for this meeting – develop your questions in advance
- Always ask for additional contacts so you can continue to expand your network
- Ask about professional publications you might want to read
- Ask about professional associations you might want to join
- Ask what you missed – what didn't you ask that would be important for you to know?
- **NEVER** ask for a job

Maintain your network

A powerful, professional network has a life of its own and requires "care" at regular intervals – after all, you never know when you might need to put it to use again. Also, networking is a multidirectional venture. At times you will be seeking support and/or information from your network. Other times you can provide support and/or information to those within your network.

Ways that you can care for your network include:

- Nurture your current contacts
- Continually add new contacts

Nurture your current contacts. Keep them apprised of your professional progress. Did you follow-up with contacts to whom you've been referred? Have you secured a position? Share information with them you believe they may find useful – perhaps an article you've recently read. Be available to help people they refer to you.

Continually expand your network. Your network should be ever evolving and expanding. Perhaps you don't want to over-utilize your existing contacts. They may move out of the field and possibly out of your network. Your professional needs will change as your career progresses and your current network might not yield the contacts you will then need. Keep your network alive.