

Networking

Networking is an essential part of the job changer's toolkit. Let's first of all deal with a few misconceptions:

- It is not about begging for a job.
- It is not about exploiting people you know.
- It's not about your 'old school tie'.
- It does not put you in a bad light.
- It does not require extraordinarily good sales skills.
- It is not your last resort.

Networking is about **research, not job search**. We all know we need to do it, but we hope that it will just happen, naturally. It won't. It takes conscious activity and effort, but the good news is that it requires a skill set you can learn.

Networking is something we all do unconsciously. If you move to a new town and want to find a good dentist or know the best local greengrocer, you ask people, casually. We learn, share and network all the time.

The old hands in career change tell you that it's all about *who* you know, not *what* you know. Wrong. In the information age, retrieving and applying the right piece of knowledge is crucial.

The key fears we have about networking are:

- That it feels wrong – demeaning, or exploitative.
- Fear of refusal or rejection
- Not knowing how to begin

Let's clear the first issue out of the way. If networking was about the people you know already, there would be little point to it. It's about discovering new contacts.

Is it about exploiting others? Only if that's what you set out to do. The US career guru Bernard Haldane used the term "chain of helpfulness". Many people begin to network by asking themselves "what do I have to offer?" – "what can I share with others?" It's sometimes useful to be seen as an information broker, or just as a useful person who brings the right people together.

Here's another parallel from the Net. At first firms using the Internet tried to copyright ideas and information. That worked at first, but gave way to a new concept: giving it away. The concept turns traditional ideas about intellectual capital on their head. Giving valuable material away captures human attention, which in turn leads to market share.

Many useful computer software packages are now given away free. How does anyone make any money on them? – Through the networks that are created as a result. Microsoft knew this well when it gave away its Internet Explorer web browser. Each additional user, each additional contact, creates an extra "node" in the network.

As Bernard Haldane's model suggests, networks are about friendship groupings in business, about pooled information, about lifetime connections. The key questions to ask anyone who is reluctant to network is "are you reluctant to increase your group of friends?". A true network is about co-operation, not competition, and about sharing a genuine interest.

Beginnings of great networks

Your network as a career changer is going to be focused on people who can give you key information about what jobs are like, how companies are changing, and what trends are affecting your chosen sector.

Begin with your close circle of friends, and then spread out to professional contacts, clients, suppliers, professional bodies, trade bodies – the list is endless.

Try finding out what you have in common with the people you talk to, and ask what you can add: what contacts, information, ideas do you have? If others can help you, ask for their assistance honestly.

Think carefully about the way your call is received. The question that comes to mind that is on the receiving end of a networking phone call is "what does he/she want?", quickly followed by "what am I being asked to do?". Only a small minority of people will respond to an invitation to "network". What busy people do respond to is:

- 1 an opportunity to help someone by being an "expert".
- 2 an opportunity to learn something quickly.
- 3 an opportunity to talk about themselves.

One tip: once you get someone to talk to you, never leave them feeling that they have been no use to you at all.

First of all, learn how to conduct an informational interview. Find someone who knows about a field of work in detail, and ask to see them for a short interview during which you ask a series of key questions about:

- How people get into this line of work
- What's enjoyable about it
- What's not so great
- How the industry/ sector is changing
- What kind of people are going to do well in the future.

Then make sure you ask for the names of three other people who can give you further assistance. Those three contacts then blossom into 9 further contacts, and so on.

It's possible to build up a network of between 60 and 100 useful, curious and interesting people within about 3 months. Interesting things happen when you start to make connections between them. Try hosting breakfast meetings or lunches to bring your network together. Throw in an external speaker to add to the mix.

Some techniques that will help:

- 1 Build slowly, and methodically. Put time aside each week.
- 2 Keep good records. Use an electronic diary and address book to keep the details. Record the "hooks", i.e. factors that you have in common. Microsoft's Outlook allows you to record links between contacts.
- 3 Try to tap into existing networks: interest groups, Internet chatgroups, professional bodies, branch meetings....
- 4 Think of yourself as a provider, not a hunter. What can you add – maybe you can set up an interest group or circulate information, maybe start a newsletter or chat room.
- 5 Ask yourself all the time: what can I add to this network? Be remembered as a source of information, a person who brings others together.

