In this article...

Two anecdotes clearly show the differences between people who know how to successfully network and those who don’t.

Donna was the medical director of a medical device company. She transitioned to that position from private practice as a gynecologist, and was really enjoying what she was doing.

She found her job through networking and promised herself she’d “pay it forward” and network with people who asked for her help. But her resolve was being tested by some of the people she networked with.

She met recently with an internist named Todd. The person who introduced them at a medical gathering briefly described what Donna did and mentioned that she’d once been in private practice. Todd told her he wanted to change careers, and started to monopolize the conversation with networking questions.

After talking to Todd a while, Donna gently put on the brakes. There were other people she wanted to chat with; she didn’t want to spend the entire evening talking to Todd. So she offered to meet with him at another time, and gave him her card. She chalked up his insensitivity to eagerness.

He called and they set up a time to get together. After a few perfunctory pleasantries he launched into a detailed description of his background. He concluded by asking Donna what jobs she thought he should pursue, given his background.

Donna was a little taken aback. His recitation of his history didn’t put her in a position to know what he’d be good at or enjoy doing. She felt at a loss to say much. He then said he thought he might be interested in a job like hers, and asked if she knew of any openings. She said (honestly) that she didn’t know of any.

He next asked if she could refer him to anyone else he could network with. Donna was hesitant to give him the names of her contacts because she knew he’d be likely to put them on the spot for a job. She tap danced and finally said she needed some time to think over who she might recommend.

They continued talking for a while, with Todd asking a few distracted questions he could easily have answered with Internet research. Then he glanced at his watch, and said he had to leave. That was the last she’d heard from him.

Fear sets in

A few weeks later, Donna got a call from someone else who wanted to network. She found herself reluctant to respond. Giving networking interviews took a lot of time and she was really busy.

She quickly realized, however, that the real reason for her reluctance was the unpleasant experience she’d had with Todd. She felt used and unappreciated by him and it was souring her on giving networking interviews.

She then recalled a time when she met with an endocrinologist named Matt, and her attitude toward networking began to swing in the other direction.

Donna had known Matt slightly when they were medical students. He’d also gone into private practice and was now interested in making a career change. He called and asked if she’d be willing to give him the benefit of her insight and advice about going from private practice to being a medical director in an entrepreneurial setting. He added that he wanted to make it clear he wasn’t going to put her on the spot by asking for a job. That put Donna at ease.

When they met, Matt spent a considerable amount of time at the beginning asking about her job, how she liked it and how she found it. Donna enjoyed telling him about her successes. He indicated he had researched the organization she worked for and was impressed by its track record.

Then he told her concisely about his own background in a way that made her think he’d fit well into the field. He followed that by asking for her input on his resume, and
feedback on how he came across when he talked about his background. She gave him a few suggestions and he took notes.

He asked if there were others she could refer him to. She thought through whom among her contacts might be helpful to him, and gave him names and contact information, knowing he would treat her referrals considerately.

A few days after meeting with Matt, Donna got a very nice thank you note from him, recounting how and why their meeting had been valuable to him. He followed this with occasional emails in which he reported how he put her advice to good use, and what happened as he met with the people to whom she'd referred him.

A few months later he emailed to tell her he'd found a job, and that it was a referral from one of her referrals that had led to his getting hired. He thanked her again for her help and said he'd like to stay in touch and also hoped someday to return the favor she'd done him.

Never ask for a job in a networking interview, either directly or indirectly.

As she reflected on that experience with Matt, Donna's commitment to “paying it forward” was re-energized. She decided she wasn't going to let the fact that Todd botched networking get in the way of meeting with the person who just called.

The back story

The effectiveness of Matt's networking was the product of a great deal of preparation. He understood the ground rules for good networking, and had carefully rehearsed interviewing.

But his preparation had gone far beyond that. He also knew what kind of a job he wanted. That enabled him to figure out what kind of people he needed to meet with, what he wanted to ask them, and how to talk about himself.

When he started thinking about a career change, Matt wasn't sure what he wanted to do. All he knew for sure was that he couldn't see himself continuing in private practice. That's when he made an appointment to see me.

Our first step was to figure out what he wanted in a work situation. We identified his skills (medical and non-medical), and explored a host of other issues: passions, constraints, preferred working conditions, financial needs, life priorities, etc. We distilled this analysis into a “shopping list” of what he was looking for, and brainstormed a number of new career directions that might fit his needs.

His first round of networking was aimed at determining which new career direction would best suit his needs. He sought input from people in the fields he investigated about the extent to which their work fit his shopping list. That's how he decided what he wanted to do.

His second round of networking (the stage at which he met Donna), had a totally different purpose. By
then he knew he wanted to be a medical director in an entrepreneurial setting. What he needed at that stage was advice about how to land a job.

He asked for input on his resume and self-presentation, for feedback on his strengths and weaknesses as a candidate, suggestions for how to go about job hunting and referrals to others in the field.

**Ground rules**

These were the ground rules Matt followed in both phases of networking:

- Focus on obtaining information and advice. Never ask for a job in a networking interview, either directly (“Do you have any openings?”) or indirectly (“Do you know of any openings?”). This tends to put people on the defensive and makes them uncomfortable.
- Prepare in advance for the interview. You are the interviewer! You need to be clear about the specific questions you want to cover, and what you want to say about yourself. Develop a networking agenda and rehearse how to do a good interview.
- Avoid springing a networking interview on someone when they aren’t expecting it and haven’t agreed to talk to you. Instead approach a person in advance by phone, email or in person and ask if they would be willing to meet with you.
- Ask questions people can realistically answer. Most people can give you detailed information about their field, and tell you whether they think your resume positions you well. They can’t tell you what kind of job you should pursue. That type of question requires careful self-analysis and research.
- Ask questions about the person you are meeting, what they do and how they got where they are. Being genuinely interested in them is central to developing a good relationship.
- Research the field, the individual, and the organization they work for, so you don’t waste your time (or theirs) asking questions you could answer for yourself.
- Write a thank-you note within a few days of your meeting.
- Stay in touch, in a considerate way, with the people you meet. A great way to do that is with brief email reports on your progress, indicating you don’t necessarily expect a reply.
- Make every effort to give back to the people you meet. Some examples include: sharing non-confidential information, offering to connect them to others and putting your resources at their disposal.

Good networking can be an energizing experience for both parties, offering the opportunity for mutual help now and in the future. Poor networking is frustrating for everyone, and is usually fruitless in advancing career objectives. Even worse, it gives networking a bad reputation and discourages people from giving networking interviews.

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Note: Examples in this column are fictionalized to protect privacy.