

You're hired! The power of networking

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Abstract. Networking is considered one of the most effective ways to find employment, yet many in the field of supported employment do not use networking effectively. Many job developers continue to work with job seekers in applying for advertised positions. This manuscript describes ways that job developers and job seekers must work together to use their networks in order to enhance employment opportunities.

1. Introduction

Despite the fact that networking is one of the most effective ways to connect with business [1] many job developers and job seekers do not use this job development tool as effectively as they could. Networking is a widely accepted practice in business and it is an important approach for job developers and job seekers to connect with employers and increase success in the labor market. Networks are a type of social capital that encompass the connections that people have with family, friends, and acquaintances who be able to provide a job seeker with information about employment opportunities or possibly provide influence over hiring decisions [4].

In an open job market, where jobs are publicly advertised, job seekers may find employment opportunities, but the odds of securing a position are significantly reduced because the job seeker will be competing with hundreds of other applicants for that same job. According to research, 60%–75% of job openings are never advertised publicly but are found through the “hidden job market” [2,5].

Job developers and job seekers must put energy into networking in order for it to be effective. The first step is to understand what networking is. Second, it is es-

sential to organize networks (e.g., using a business card or tickler file). The third step is to stay in contact with network contacts (e.g., emails, periodic phone calls, going out for coffee, birthday or holiday cards). Finally, it is critical to continue increasing your network by setting a goal such as meeting five new contacts per week.

1.1. Defining networking

Networking is “an arrangement of people crossed at regular intervals by other people, all of whom are cultivating mutually beneficial, give-and-take, win-win relationships” [1, p. 2]. The key to effective networking is not who you know, but who knows YOU! Networking is the most important aspect in job development and it is a 24 hour a day/7 day a week job. We meet people on a daily basis – some are old acquaintances and others are new. When we meet people, it is important to elicit feelings of knowing, liking and trusting in order to build a relationship. Networking is all about listening and being “you-oriented” (instead of “I-oriented”) [1]. When meeting initially meeting someone, old or new, the focus should be asking the person about themselves and their business rather than identifying how you can get a job.

1.2. Organizing networks

The foundation for networking is based on the old adage, “It’s not *what* you know but *who* you know.” Networking requires developing an extensive list of

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contacts. The best place to begin developing a contact list is through family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and social or religious organizations. People in your network may be able to provide job leads, offer information about a particular industry or company and introduce you to new contacts. It is important to note that networking is not the sole responsibility of the job developer; it is an important skill for the job seeker and his or her family as well. While the job developer has his/her own set of contacts, job seekers and family members also have connections with people. While the job seeker's network may not lead to job leads for them, they may be able to help someone else, which is just as important in networking. Networking can be done through personal connections, referrals from others, using existing customers, or finding the "centers of influence" in a company.

1.3. *Personal sphere of influence*

A sphere of influence refers to the number of people you know; either directly or indirectly. The average person knows about 250 people that could be added to their network. These 250 people are not necessarily close friends, but people you come in contact with every day interactions. An individual's sphere of influence includes everyone from family members, friends, acquaintances, neighborhood associations, membership organizations in which you are involved (e.g., PTA, Garden Club, Book Club, Little League), religious organization membership, places you shops, and so on. Job developers as well as job seekers should write down all of the people they know or interact with on a weekly basis. This list will be a starting point for developing a network list.

1.4. *Standard referral*

A typical practice in job seeking is to obtain a letter of recommendation from a current or former employer, or volunteer supervisor. The same holds true for job developers who should also maintain a file of recommendations from employers who have worked with them in the past. These letters can be used to open up doors to other businesses in the same industry.

Another type of standard referral can happen after a meeting with a potential employer. Whether the employer agrees to work with you or not, job developers should ask, "Who else in your industry would be interested in learning about our services?" The meeting should end with the question, "How can I know if

someone I'm talking with would be a good employer for you?" This question is critical because you have made yourself a valuable asset to that employer. You have let the employer know that you are interested in the success of their business. It is important to remember when asking for referrals that people will do business and will refer business to others they like, know and trust. The key to networking is developing that connection and cultivating it into a long term relationship. According to Dennis Waitley [6], you never "close" a sale, you open a long-term relationship.

1.5. *Existing customers*

Along with the standard referral, business literature suggests that we should never neglect those who sell to us [2,4,5]. Many businesses will work with you out of a sense of appreciation for your patronage. Look at the places you or job seeker shop and network with those who sell you goods or services (e.g., insurance, lawyer, doctor, dentist, hairdresser, dry cleaners, grocery store, auto repair, bank, etc.).

1.6. *Centers of influence*

One of the most effective sources of networking is by participating in business events through Chambers of Commerce or Small Business Associations. However, simply being a member of a business group is worthless without participating in the activities sponsored by the organization. For example, job developers should participating in after hours events, committees, or attend networking lunches in order to effectively connect with businesses. Job developers must realize the purpose of attending various business-related functions is to work and build a network. While at the event, it is important for job developers to introduce themselves to someone new, possibly a person who is a Center of Influence. A Center of Influence is someone who has been in the community a long time or who has a high profile position. While these individuals may not be able to employ someone, they may be able to connect you with others who can [1]. While at these events, it is important get business cards so that you can send a follow up note the next day. The key to networking is understanding that "we are not dependent on each other nor are we dependent of each other – we are interdependent with each other" [1, p. 12].

1.7. *Staying in touch with your network*

Timely and consistent follow-up is the key to successful networking. Meeting someone once is rarely enough to connect with him or her on a level to maintain a relationship; repeated contacts are what do the trick. Networking requires staying in touch with your contacts formally or informally. Mackay [3] suggests keeping a rolodex of everyone you know and putting a little something about that person on each card. When you run across an article of interest or a need to connect with a certain industry, your network will be at your fingertips. To manage follow-up activities with your network, some type of contact management system needs to be in place. When network list is short, contacts can be kept in a tickler file using a notebook or note cards. As the networking lists gets larger (200 contacts or more), it will be helpful to consider a computerized system designed for contact management, such as Microsoft Outlook, FileMaker Pro or ACT!

There are three approaches to follow up with people you have met: by phone, by mail, or in person.

1.8. *Mail/E-mail/Fax*

The first step to following up, which very few people actually do, is to send a personalized thank-you note. As noted earlier, after meeting a contact at an event, sending a thank-you note the next day sets you apart from others. After the initial contact, think of ways to keep in touch on a regular basis. Send a note with a clipping from the business section of the newspaper relating to the employer or e-mail a link to an interesting web site.

1.9. *Phone*

After an initial thank you note has been sent, a follow-up call to arrange a follow up meeting over coffee or a more formalized meeting may be the next step. Remember, the goal of networking is to continue establishing a reciprocal relationship. The call might focus on getting further acquainted, obtaining more information about their business, or arrange to meet in person to find out more about each other's work.

1.10. *In person*

To follow up in person, schedule lunch or coffee, or invite your contacts to an upcoming event you plan to hold or attend. Once you have a large follow-up list, consider a regular newsletter or postcard mailing.

1.11. *Increasing your network*

Networking is about connecting with others and this happens every day. One way to increase your network is to create an "elevator speech". An "elevator speech" is a 30 second commercial for yourself or your company. It is important to be able to tell someone what you do or who you are in 30 seconds so that the remaining conversation is based on the individual. In order to get referrals from others, you first must have a clear understanding of what you do that you can easily explain to others.

Simply handing out business cards or obtaining a business card is not networking unless a connection is made. Business card exchanges will not necessarily foster a relationship. It is critical to follow up with that person and ask questions about themselves, their company and future employment needs. Questions are the most valuable tools in networking. In order to get the employer to know, like and trust you, it is necessary to ask the right questions.

Burg [1] identified ten networking questions that job developers should add to their collection. He suggests not using all the questions in one conversation, but the questions are designed to tell the job developer something about the person.

1. How did you get started in XYZ business?
2. What do you enjoy most about your occupation?
3. What separates you and your company from the competition?
4. What advice would you give someone starting out in the ABC industry?
5. What one thing would you do with your business if you knew you could not fail?
6. What significant changes have you seen take place in your industry/profession in the last 10 years?
7. What do you see as the pending trends in your industry/profession?
8. What was the funniest or strangest incident that you've experienced in your business?
9. What ways have you found to be most effective in promoting your business?
10. What one sentence would you like people to use when describing the way you do business? (pp. 17–19).

If the individual with whom you are talking is not directly or indirectly in business, Berg suggests changing the questions above to focus on "F-O-R-M" (p. 24); family, occupation, recreation and message (what the

individual deems important). His final suggestion is to ask the person a final question relating to how you can help them. For example, asking the person, "How can I know if someone I'm speaking to is someone you would like to meet?" Berg suggests that asking this question demonstrates that you are interested in their well being which will lead to a contact who knows, likes and trusts you.

While networking is important for job developers, it is also important for job seekers. Job seekers should not be waiting for a job to be found for them, but rather they should become engaged in the process through networking. As they are shopping, going to school or volunteering, job seekers can develop a large network that will not only help them with future employment opportunities, but also keep them connected with the community.

1.12. Patrick's network

Patrick is an 18-year old young man, the oldest of three children, living at home with his parents. Like many 18 year olds, he has a lot of interests and hobbies, and wants a job. Patrick enjoys singing Christian music, dating, participating in sports such as basketball, baseball, swimming, and Tae Kwon Do (he is a first degree black belt) and loves history – especially Egyptian history. His favorite subjects in school include Consumer Education, "because it helps me understand how to spend my money wisely", Foods, "I like foods because we get to cook and eat our creations!" and choir.

When describing himself, Patrick says that he has Downs Syndrome which "sometimes makes it hard for others to understand me and for me to understand others." He further explains that it is harder to make friends having Downs Syndrome and that he needs to work harder to be smart in his classes. Patrick notes that because of his disability, people often pre-judge his skills and abilities. Like other students transitioning from high school to the adult world, Patrick has goals. He would like to become a youth lawyer working with youth who have disabilities. Ultimately, he wants to move out of his parent's home and live on his own with friends or his brother.

Patrick is involved in various activities in both his school and community. He volunteers at his church and at a nursing home, is the team basketball manager, and attends a work-camp during the summer that rebuilds houses in impoverished communities around the

country. In the summer of 2005, Patrick's networking worked for him.

For the past few summers, Patrick participated in a summer work camp with other youth from around the states. The group, consisting of about 400 young adults along with adult chaperones, traveled to impoverished communities to assist in rebuilding the interior and exterior of people's homes. Once at the location, crews of young adults were formed to begin working on building wheelchair ramps, interior/exterior painting and even tearing off roofs – whatever needed to be done to renovate the house. Each crew member was assigned different duties, for example, someone would be assigned as a crew leader, while another would be assigned to gather and monitor the tools and others would be assigned specific work duties such as carpentry work or painting.

In the summer of 2005, Patrick attended his second work camp. Along with being assigned a painting job, Patrick was also assigned the duty of "break maker." The break maker was responsible for getting the cooler filled with water and Gatorade in the morning, and at noon would stand in line to get lunches together for the rest of the crew and set up the lunches for break. Patrick was assigned to a crew working on a very large house when he met a young man named Cameron. While Cameron was assigned to a different work crew, he would eat lunch with Patrick and got to know him throughout the week. The more Cameron got to know Patrick, the more impressed he was by Patrick's skills and goals for the future. Cameron's father was at another site and one night talked with his father about Patrick stating, "Dad, you should just get to know this guy. He's the coolest guy. Hard working, just a really deliberate cool guy." The crew Cameron's father was working on finished early so they were assigned to come to help with the house Cameron and Patrick were working on. Todd, Cameron's father, stated that he was anxious to meet Patrick and he was impressed seeing him "in action." What he observed truly impressed him. Todd watched Patrick diligently scraping and painting the bottom block of the perimeter of the house. It was clear that Patrick had charted out his work and he would be finished by the end of the day. Patrick told Todd that his job was also to get lunch that day. Todd watched Patrick get the lunches ready and set everything out for the crew (which had now doubled since adding the new crew). Todd noted that during lunch everyone was talking and hanging around, including Patrick. After lunch, everyone continued "playing with the dogs and goofing around" except Patrick, who got

his work clothes back on and said, "I'm going back to work" to finish the last section of his painting. Todd noted, "That caught my eye. He was the first one to get up and go back to work. Patrick was diligent and he had his goals."

As it turned out, Todd owned a company in the community in which Patrick lived called Tailored Label Products, Inc. When everyone was ready to go home, Todd talked with Patrick and his father, explaining that if Patrick was looking for a job in the future Todd had a special place where he could fit in. When they returned home, Patrick's father followed up with Todd. They met at Tailored Label Products and Patrick's father was given a tour. Todd talked with the president of the company, Mike, about the possibility of hiring Patrick on a part time basis. Mike then connected with Deb from human resources to identify jobs that Patrick would be able to do that would benefit the company. They talked with the operations supervisor, Jeff, who was excited about hiring Patrick. The Tailored Label Products team was determined to find a way to make this a successful first job experience for Patrick. The team identified a mentor for Patrick and worked out a schedule that allowed him to work after school. They came up with a list of various types of work for Patrick and pulled some of their subcontract work from a local sheltered workshop realizing that the tasks could be done in house.

To ensure success, the team talked with Patrick's parents who identified his strengths and areas of need (e.g., communication, comprehension, physical). The team then explained how to support Patrick to his co-workers. Initially an adult service agency came in to provide additional support as needed, but they quickly faded out as Patrick's natural supports took over. According to Jeff, "it's an automatic rule around here. You don't stick Patrick in a corner and hope he fends for himself, you actually want to have him out in front." While there have been frustrations, the team works on ways to support Patrick. Mike commented on a time that he personally was out on the floor watching Patrick apply labels to boxes. The way Patrick was doing the task was very labor intensive and frustrating for him. Mike stopped him and said, "Why don't you do it this way?" then showed Patrick a more efficient way of labeling. When he backed away, Patrick utilized the new approach and said, "This is much easier Mike."

When Todd met Patrick, his first thought was that he deserved a fair chance at working. He explained that this would never have happened without Cameron connecting with Patrick on the crew at the work camp.

Todd noted that, "It was just common sense – a natural thing to do when you find someone with a good work ethic, you find a way to bring them into your company." The company gets as much as Patrick does. Mike stated that if a company is willing to bend the "traditional rules, policies, and procedures to hire someone with a disability, it sends an awesome message to our entire workforce." Deb, from human resources noted that it all stems back to what Todd told the team when he returned after having met Patrick, "A lot of times when you meet with people, you do not really see the person. I think because Todd saw the person first, that was they key. The burden was not Patrick's disability; the burden was on us to think creatively about all the options that we could provide Patrick."

2. Summary

Networking is about meeting and connecting with people. Effective job developers and job seekers must go out of their way to connect every single person that they have the opportunity to meet. Depending upon culture and personality, meeting new people will be easier for some than for others. If networking is challenging, start on a smaller scale, but at least start somewhere. As in Patrick's case, volunteering is a great way to begin networking. Volunteering can help people who are shy or who find it hard to meet new people become more involved in networking on an informal basis. Volunteering will afford you a smaller group of people to connect with and you can build from there. In addition to networking, volunteering can also build self-esteem and confidence faster than anything else because you are helping others.

When networking, follow these guidelines: 1) be sincere, polite and formal. Do not use a person's first name right away (unless they say you can). Make sure to listen and ask questions about the person and their business; 2) Do not ask for (or expect) something in return. Relationships take time and what the person has to offer will probably come at a later time; 3) follow through with promises. If you say you will get back with them about an issue or concern, make sure you do; 4) do not wait to be introduced by someone else - practice a self-introductions; and (5) always say thank-you in a memorable way.

The time to establish relationships is BEFORE a job is needed; so networking is an ongoing process. It is always important to keep adding to your network, both inside and outside your industry. Why? Networking

allows you to be in a position to win and be in with the decision makers who are making things happen. You can't take advantage of that unless you position yourself to win by staying in contact with your network.

Many job developers and job seekers have the wrong idea about networking. Networking is not something that should be done just to find a job. There is no downside to networking. In fact, networking will only result in more job opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Most jobs are found in the "hidden job market" and once they go public, the competition is much more difficult to overcome.

Networking is about being genuine and building trusting relationships. When networking, it is important to have a "giving mindset" or a "you-oriented" approach so people will get to know you and for you to get to know them. Every networking situation, formal or informal, should be approached with a genuine interest in getting to know people and their needs. Asking open-ended questions and being a resource for people are keys to successful networking.

Patrick was able to secure his job because of his

own networking; his ability to connect with others in a variety of environments and demonstrate his skills. He has been working at Tailored Label Products, Inc. since November of 2005 working from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday earning \$8.50/hour. He has colleagues who provide natural supports. When asked about his future goals, Patrick stated, "To work on the machines".

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