

From “Notworking” to Networking Online

Using the Web to build up a huge address book of contacts is all the rage these days as a growing number of people worry about their employment security or actually find themselves out on the pavement looking for work. And why not, it's quick, easy to do and very technically correct. In fact, many people now consider it the 21st Century equivalent of networking. Make a contact online, pop them in your trusty address book, and boom! you're done. Whether you're new to the workforce or a grizzled veteran, online networking is an absolute dream.

That view is correct, but not as most people understand it. Using the Web to make contacts is a dream. Unfortunately, however, it isn't networking. If the purpose of the activity is to forge professional connections that can help you navigate your career successfully, then what's being done today is better described as “notworking.”

Here's the hard truth: there is no free lunch in networking. The word says exactly what it means. It's netWORK, not net-get-around-to-it-when-ever-it's-convenient. Networking works because it establishes a relationship—familiarity and trust—between two or more people. It's that relationship—not some connection twelve people removed from you—that enables you to acquire the assistance of others when you're looking for a new or better job.

So why bother? If networking is so hard to do, why invest the time and effort? The answer is simple: many of the best jobs are filled that way. Most employers will tell you that their most effective recruiting tool is their Employee Referral Program. That's networking. The organization relies on the relationships of its employees to find the talent it needs for its open positions. In other cases, recruiters do their own networking. You'll find them at association meetings and alumni group events looking for prospects who are qualified for the jobs they're trying to fill. The best of these recruiters don't run around and collect as many business cards as they can; they focus instead on specific individuals and work on getting to know them.

And there's the rub. Old fashioned networking is not only hard work; it takes a lot of time. You have to attend meetings, connect with people over lunch or after work and carve precious minutes out to talk to them on the phone or email them one at a time. That's why most of us talk about networking and never get around to it. There are just too many other demands on our time during the day.

But, what if we could acquire the advantages of networking and eliminate or at least dramatically diminish the time it requires? What if we could make our efforts at building relationships highly efficient and thus much more productive? Well, that's the power and promise of real online networking.

Online networking is not electronic contact management. It is an activity that connects you with others in the world of work and facilitates your developing the familiarity and trust of solid professional relationships with them, all at warp speed. If you accomplish only one of those objectives, you're “notworking.” If you accomplish both, you're networking and your investment of time and effort is much more likely to pay off.

How can you engage in real online networking? My suggestion is that you follow a simple three-step process.

Step 1: Pick the right site. Online networking occurs at sites which provide discussion forums, bulletin boards, listservers or chat areas. Not all sites offer such networking platforms, of course, but many do, so

the first step involves finding the site or sites that will best connect you with your professional peers. They might be:

- a professional association or society Web-site;
- a commercial career portal (a job board with career as well as job search information);
- a site operated by your undergraduate or graduate alumni organization;
- an affinity group Web-site (e.g., women in technology; African-Americans in finance); or
- a newsgroup (Google.com is the gateway to the Web's 2+ million newsgroups).

Step 2: Learn the rules of the road. The people who participate at each of these discussion areas are a self-formed community. They may number fewer than a dozen or more than a thousand people in the U.S. and around the world. To ensure that you will be welcomed into the community, therefore, you must make sure you understand and then participate according to its (almost always unwritten) standards. How can you know what they are? Once you've joined the group, lurk before you launch off. Look over the shoulder of the participants and see how they interact with one another. Are they formal or informal in their messaging? How do they handle disagreements or opposing points of view? What kind of vocabulary is the norm and do they tolerate profanity? You needn't conform to a particular point of view at most of these sites, but you do need to conform to their rules of behavior.

Step 3: Practice the Golden Rule of Networking. The rule is as simple as it is profound: You have to give, if you want to get. In other words, if you want others to share their insights, expertise and relationships with you, you must do the same for them. That's why networking is work. You have to do it regularly in order to build up a reservoir of good will, a rainy day fund of familiarity and trust that you can tap into as your career requires. For that reason, I recommend that you network online twice a week for no less than 30 and no more than 60 minutes per session. Thirty minutes is the minimum necessary to establish relationships online, while the 60 minute cutoff ensures that you don't get seduced into spending too much time at this one activity. Then, be the best professional colleague you can be in each and every networking session in which you participate.

Finally, as helpful as online networking can be, it is a supplement to, not a replacement for traditional networking. Despite what technophiles and Internet enthusiasts will tell you, landing a dream job still requires human interaction. That interaction can begin on the Web and even be enriched there, but it cannot occur exclusively online for one simple reason: real people not virtual ones fill jobs.

Thanks for reading,
Peter

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