

MARCH 9, 2009 | INSIGHT

THE MAGIC OF NETWORKING

By Karen Kaplowitz

Most professionals land new jobs through their business and professional networks, not through job listings or recruiters. Online social networks have exploded but don't change the rules, which may seem old-fashioned, for the basic one-to-one interactions that are at the heart of successful networking.

Start by making a list of the people who think highly of you. Initially include everyone who meets this standard, including clients, co-workers, adversaries, judges, family, friends, neighbors, classmates and members of groups to which you belong. The groups can include professional, business, community, sports or religious groups. Be inclusive. Creating this list is empowering because it is evidence of the strength of the relationships and reputation you have built. The people on this list, your inner circle, are the strongest assets you have in your quest for a new job because this group can vouch for your skills, energy and integrity based on their personal experience of you.

Not everyone on your list is of equal value. Your parents may be your biggest fans but may not have personal experience of your quality as a lawyer or strong networks of their own to whom to introduce you. Prioritize your list based on the likelihood people can help you expand your network. Which people are active in relevant business and professional circles? Which people have broad networks? Which people are good connectors, people who are comfortable and adept at making introductions within their networks? Which people are LinkedIn? Which people care about you and are likely to invest some effort in helping you?

First, be clear about the help you want from your inner circle. If any of your biggest fans happen to know of specific job opportunities, you have hit the jackpot. But don't expect them to know of jobs, and don't limit your discussion to job openings. The goal is to get your inner circle to help you expand your network through their networks to new people who may need what you can provide.

Do not plan to start off with a pitch about yourself. Networking to find a job is a process of discovery and matching your talents to law firms or other organizations that need your help. It does not matter how skilled you are if you are not talking to people who need those specific skills. Therefore, the focus of every conversation is asking questions to uncover who needs what you do.

Your conversations will be more fruitful if you have a full picture of each person you approach. Before you contact people, do your research. Check them out in LinkedIn and Facebook and also Google them and their businesses. Look at their businesses' Web sites and public filings. Consider talking to other people you know in common for background information.

LinkedIn and other social networks can provide great information on the people you know, and job information, too. But it is always easier to approach people you know directly who have experience with your work. The further away you get from people who know you, whether using online social networks or offline contacts, the harder it is to get people to pay attention. Unquestionably, start with people you know when you launch your job search.

Have a strategy for each phone call, including specific questions you intend to ask; how you plan to present yourself; which people in their networks you would like them to introduce you, if any; and other help you intend to ask for.

If you are calling people with whom your relationships are stale, then be prepared to resume the relationship first. Pick up where you left off. Try to remember some common denominator or experience, like the outcome of the case you handled; the opposing lawyer or judge; a class you had together; or mutual friends. Do not swoop in to attack your self-interest first.

Do not expect most people you contact to come up with good ideas on their own of organizations or people for you to approach. You need to ask informed, leading questions. When people get stuck and say they have no one else to suggest you talk to, ask the ultimate question: "If you were in my shoes, to whom in your own circle would you talk?"

You want people to relate your situation to their own lives and in the process of empathizing with you, to dig deeper into their own resource pool.

Once people identify other people you should contact, do not ask everyone to make introductions for you. That is a trap that leaves you hanging until you can verify that the introduction has been made. How many times have you had to chase someone to find out if they made the call or sent the e-mail they promised to? To avoid this problem, when people suggest people for you to talk to, ask for contact information and for permission to use their name with their contacts.

Do take advantage of reliable people who will follow through if they say they will make a phone call or send a note. It is very powerful when people call on your behalf and vouch for you to new people. Just don't assume that everyone is reliable and set yourself up for the limbo of waiting for introductions.

To get appointments with new people, call the person's office and explain to the assistant that you were referred to her boss by your mutual friend and would like her help getting on her boss's calendar for a short conversation. Then ask for the assistant's e-mail address so you can send a short note explaining who sent you and for what purpose. You are engaging with the assistant and also insuring the full message gets through. Tell the assistant you will call her back if you don't hear from her. When you tell people this, it is easier to make the second call without feeling like a nuisance.

Ask for a short meeting on their turf, or ask to set a time on their calendar for a 15-minute phone conversation. Do not propose lunch unless the person is close to you and you think he or she would appreciate meeting for lunch. Meeting at their offices is particularly helpful if you want to meet other people they work with. If your conversation turns to someone in their own organization, you can seize the opportunity to ask if they would walk you over to meet that person right then and there. When people suggest other people for you to talk to, try to get their contact information on the spot from their assistants, too. If you are on a phone call, ask to be transferred to their assistant for the contact information.

"Engage" is the critical word. Consider what will draw new people to be interested in your quest. The answer is virtually always something that relates to them, not you. Great networking conversations are ones in which you are talking about the people you contact or you are getting them to talk about themselves. As you prepare for each conversation, think about what you have to offer in the exchange. Does talking to you reinforce their relationship with the person you know in common? Are you conveying information that is important to them? Are you a potential resource to them? Can you appeal to their pride in their own success?

Prompt follow-up to each meeting or conversation is essential. Always circle back to the people who made the introduction to let them know you connected and that their contacts were helpful to you.

Make the new people you meet a permanent part of your network. If you have learned ways you can be helpful to them, follow through, with introductions or information. Get them onto your mailing lists and in your database.

Once you have exhausted your first round of contacts, of course keep going to new layers of your network - but don't forget your inner circle. As your search continues, you can circle back to them, too.

When you land a new position, go back to everyone who has been helpful to you in your quest for a new job to thank them and let them know where you landed. Some of them may be great prospects as clients, too. Then stay in touch, always looking for ways to give back in exchange for the generosity of the people you met when you needed help.

Karen Kaplowitz is president of The New Ellis Group, a business development strategy, training and coaching consulting firm that provides transition services to law firms and lawyers. She can be reached at kkaplowitz@newellis.com.