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Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about Networking

An interview with Quint Careers Creative Director Katharine Hansen, PhD, about the revised edition of her book, *A Foot in the Door*, a detailed examination showing how all job-seekers can use networking to enhance their job searches.

Q: Networking sometimes gets a bad rap; some job-seekers worry that networking is equivalent to “using” people. How do *you* define networking and what do you say to those concerned about being users?

A: Networking doesn't mean asking everyone you run into for a job or even if he or she knows where the job openings are. It means establishing relationships so that you can enlist support and comfortably ask for ideas, advice, and referrals to those with hiring power. Leslie Smith of the National Association of Female Executives defines networking as the process of “planning and making contacts and sharing information for professional and personal gain.” The key word is “sharing.” Successful networking doesn't mean milking your contacts for all they're worth; it means participating in a give-and-take. Networking is at its most effective when both the networker and the contact benefit from the relationship. Even if your contact does not benefit immediately from knowing you, he or she should gain something from the relationship eventually.

Q: Why is networking so important?

A: It's because the vast majority of job vacancies—estimates range from 75 to 95 percent—are hidden from the average job seeker. These positions are never advertised and are part of the “hidden” or “closed” job market. You can find out about these jobs only through word of mouth, and word of mouth means networking.

Study after study shows that networking is the most effective way to get a job. One of the most recent is the 2008 Sources of Hire study conducted by the consulting firm Career Xroads. In that study of 49 firms with more than a million employees, internal transfers and promotions constituted 30 percent of all the positions the companies filled. Referrals (from employees, employee alumni, vendors, etc.) made up almost 29 percent of all external hires. Every third referral turns into a hire. How do job-seekers find out about internal vacant positions, as well as vacant positions outside their own companies? By networking.

Q: Why are most jobs never advertised?

Employers' reluctance to advertise is partly tied to the economy. Despite fluctuations, unemployment numbers remain relatively low in the United States. With the vast majority of the adult population employed, employers assume not many prospective

workers will be scanning the want ads and Internet job postings. With a limited audience for their ads, employers are disinclined to spend money on advertising for workers.

The second reason is more psychological. The people who read want ads are looking for jobs. While it might seem that an employer offering jobs and people looking for jobs are a perfect match, that's not often the case in the employer's mind. The employer has to wonder, Why is this person looking for a job? The answer that pops into the employer's head, whether fairly or not, is probably not a positive one. People look for jobs, many employers believe, because they are unhappy losers, job-hoppers, or unproductive malcontents who blame poor performance on their employers and believe switching jobs will solve their problems. Employers would rather go after people – called “passive candidates” – who aren't necessarily looking for work. In the employer's mind, those people will be successful, productive contributors to the company's bottom line.

Employers also know that the best candidates are likely to be those referred to them through word of mouth. It is only when employers are truly desperate to fill an opening that they place an ad.

In *A Foot in the Door*, I quote Ohio State University career counselor B. J. O'Bruba, who said: “The last place I want to pull applicants from is the classified ads of major newspapers. Classified ad applicants are unreferred, untested, and unknown. The first place I look for applicants is within my current or previous organizations or applicants who were referred to me by professional colleagues and acquaintances. These applicants are better referenced, tested, and known.”

Further, busy employers simply don't have the time to go through the mountains of resumes an ad is likely to produce, especially an Internet ad, which can draw thousands of responses because of the relative ease of responding to such an ad. Employers often find it far more efficient to ask their employees and other members of their personal networks to refer high-quality candidates to them.

Finally, the process of defining job vacancies can take a long time. In some companies, a year or more can elapse between initial conceptualization of a job and actually filling the position. Thus, at any given time, theoretical positions may exist within an organization, but the formal mechanisms of funding, structuring, and writing a job description for the position mean that the job cannot yet be advertised. That's another reason networking is so valuable. If you can tap into a job in its embryonic stages, you will have a huge advantage over those who wait to answer ads. Let's say Megabucks Corporation is planning a position that you're well qualified for, but the firm is six months away from advertising the job. You don't know about the position, but your networking efforts lead you to a key person, Joe Honcho, at Megabucks. After talking with you, Honcho attends a meeting and tells his colleagues, “Hey, I just met someone who would be great for that position we're working on.” The management team may even decide to reshape the job to fit your unique qualifications. With his team's blessing, Honcho gets you in for a series of interviews. Megabucks still may not be able to hire you until all the t's are crossed and the i's dotted, but once the job is official, you are in—all before Megabucks even had the chance to advertise the position.

Q: With whom, where, and when should you network?

A: The short answer is: everyone, everywhere, and all the time.

Q: Who are the best kinds of network contacts?

A: For college students and new grads, the best networking contacts are:

- Classmates
- Alumni, especially recent grads
- Parents
- Parents of classmates
- Other relatives
- Professors, especially your adviser
- Fraternity brothers, sorority sisters, and Greek organization alumni
- College administrators
- Coaches
- Guest speakers in your classes
- Informational interviewees

For established job-seekers, the best networking contacts are:

- Members of professional organizations
- Your past or present co-workers
- Friends you're in touch with regularly
- Old friends, such as college buddies whom you see infrequently
- Members of your religious community
- Peer volunteers
- Informational interviewees
- Your kids' friends' parents
- Your mentor(s)
- Business associates, such as customers, clients, vendors, and suppliers

Q: How many people should be in your network?

A: The consensus among networking experts is that 250 contacts is a good goal to shoot for. Why 250? Because, supposedly, everyone knows 250 people. If you were going to, say, plan your wedding, the guest list for your side of the aisle could have 250 people on it, according to Brian Krueger in his book *College Grad Job Hunter*. Others have put it more morbidly: If you died, 250 people would be affected by your death. Does that mean you should feel inadequate if your network comes nowhere near that number? Of course not. Only a small percentage of those I surveyed for *A Foot in the Door* had a network that large. Of survey respondents for the book, only 25 percent had networks of 100 people or more (and of those, only 7 percent reached the magic 250 contacts).

Q: What are some of the best venues for networking?

A: Among the 240 respondents to the survey I conducted for *A Foot in the Door*, the three venues that survey-takers found most effective were at meetings of professional organizations, during volunteer experiences, and at charity events and fundraisers.

Q: In your book, *A Foot in the Door*, you offer some unusual places in which people have networked. Can you list a few of those?

A: Some of the wildest ones include during a slaughterhouse fire, in a cadaver lab, while getting a mammogram, as a car-accident witness, on a gondola ride to a mountain top, during a prolonged rain delay at a baseball game, while donating blood, in a hot tub at a conference, and at a psychic fair waiting for a tarot-card reading.

Q: You claim that you can bond more closely with your networking contacts by letting them do you favors. Can you elaborate?

A: I got that idea through Chris Matthews, who quotes Ben Franklin in his book, *Hardball*, about how the game of politics is played: "If you want to make a friend, let someone do you a favor." The art of letting people do you favors, which Matthews contends is a key facet of political success, is also one of the best routes to effective networking. "Contrary to what many people assume," Matthews writes, "the most effective way to gain a person's loyalty is not to do him or her a favor, but to let that person do one for you." Matthews explains that when you enlist someone's aid, you are soliciting that person's investment in you and your success. The person not only feels good about helping you now, but watches out for you in the future to make sure her faith in you was not misplaced. "Those who give you one helping hand very often make a habit of looking out for you further down the road," Matthews writes. "We tend naturally to remember the people we 'discover' along the way and seek to ensure that they prove us correct."

Q: Networking is difficult for shy people. Can you offer a few tips?

A: I offer a number of tips for shy folks in *A Foot in the Door*; here are just four of them:

1. The buddy system is an effective defense against shyness at networking events. Pair up with a friend and make the rounds together. In an article on the buddy system, Clay Barrett tells the story of Joan and Cathy, who worked in different industries and in different job roles but were both laid off at about the same time. They met at a local networking group and hit it off immediately. Joan was shy but felt much more comfortable at the events with Cathy along. Meanwhile, Joan held Cathy accountable for following through on her networking efforts, previously her weak spot.
2. Even if you're feeling uneasy, try to smile and project enthusiasm and confidence. Networking for the shy and introverted is something of a performance. Sometimes you have to be a good actor. Even shy individuals are capable of acting like confident people. You simply have to step into your self-assured persona. You can slip back into the shy identity you're more comfortable with after you've accomplished what you need to. Does this basically amount to faking it—pretending to be someone you're not? Probably not. You're just using the tools within you to get a job done. They may not be tools you enjoy using every day, but they are tools you can employ when you need them.

3. One good strategy is to redirect your shyness toward helping others have a productive time, says the National Association for Female Executives. If you pretend it's your party and your responsibility to ensure everyone's enjoyment, you can relegate your shyness to the back burner.
4. While you should avoid using as a crutch online methods of networking that keep you out of the social fray, the shy person can learn to get the most out of online discussion groups, Web-based networking, and discussion groups.

Q: What about networking for career changers?

A: A chapter in *A Foot in the Door* that describes a week in the life of a networker happens to be about a career changer. He attends the meeting of a professional organization in the new field into which he's interested in entering, making some good contacts, collecting business cards, and asking questions to learn about the field. Later, he follows up with some of the people he met at the meeting. He makes plans to have coffee with a woman from the meeting to get more advice. He writes letters to some of the other people he met since he doesn't know them well. At his coffee meeting, the career-changer gives his new contact copies of his resume to distribute and gets referrals to other people who might be able to help him enter the new field. Afterwards, he phones some of the folks he's been referred to and sets up a golf game with one of them (some of the best networking is done over golf). The networker has lunch the next day with a member of his inner circle of contacts, who via phone, gives him an introduction to someone in his prospective career field, who in turn invites him to an informational interview the next week. Next the career-changer follows up with some of the people he wrote to earlier in the week and gets more referrals. He takes some time to organize the information on all his new contacts and read trade publications in his would-be career field. He ends the week with the previously scheduled golf game and obtains more advice and referrals. That's a capsule version of a chapter that illustrates the learning and networking process for someone who wants to change careers.

Q: The part of *A Foot in the Door* that is new to the 2nd edition is about networking on the Internet. Tell us about that.

A: I discuss three phases of online networking. The first largely takes place in the offline realm, where job-seekers should endeavor to raise their visibility, become known for their expertise, and "brand" themselves through such activities as writing articles, speaking to organizations, and preparing branded job-search materials, – resumes and networking cards. In the next phase, job-seekers should ensure that any employer searching for someone like them on the Web will be able to find them. This phase might include having your own Web site, online portfolio, online resume, and/or blog. The third phase entails getting involved in online social media – venues like LinkedIn and Facebook, discussion groups in your career field, and other online communities.

Q: What are some mistakes people make with online networking?

The two mistakes I see are spending too much time networking online at the expense of the more effective face-to-face networking and failing to eliminate or counteract "digital dirt," negative information about you that employers may uncover when they search for you. Digital dirt can especially be a problem for younger job-seekers who post risqué

photos of themselves or discuss sex, substance use, politics, and other dicey topics online.

Q: You devote a large section of *A Foot in the Door* to what you call “the ultimate networking technique.” What’s the technique, and why is it so effective?

A: It’s called informational interviewing, and it is just what it sounds like—interviewing designed to produce information. What kind of information? The information you need to choose or refine a career path, learn how to break in, and find out if you have what it takes to succeed. Informational interviewing is an expanded form of chatting with your network contacts. It’s the process of engaging one of your network contacts in a highly focused conversation that provides you with key information you need to launch or boost your career. The term “informational interviewing” was invented by the late Richard Nelson Bolles, author of the best-selling career guide of all time, *What Color Is Your Parachute?* Bolles refers to the process as “trying on jobs to see if they fit you.” He notes that most people screen jobs and companies after they’ve already taken a job, while informational interviewing gives you the opportunity to conduct the screening process before going after or accepting a position.

An informational interview is not the same as a job interview by any means, but it is probably the most effective form of networking there is. I require my students to perform three informational interviews per semester. Most of them are skeptical about the assignment in the beginning, but I can’t tell you how many have ended the semester amazed and delighted with how much they learned and how influential the process was for their careers. I’m not the only teacher whose students have been thrilled with informational interviews. In *A Foot in the Door*, I quote Terry Carles, a student recruitment counselor at Valencia Community College, who reported, “I teach career development, and my students are required to do an informational interview. Every semester, someone returns with a job, internship, etc., from their experience. One student completed an informational interview with a network administrator, and returned the next week with a ... job offer.”

I’ve had students who have realized as a result of informational interviewing that their career paths and even their majors are totally wrong for them. They made this discovery when there was still time to make a course correction. Others haven’t needed such a drastic change but have adjusted their assumptions and expectations based on what they learned in the interviews. When you are considering entering or changing to a certain career, it just makes all kinds of sense to talk to people in that field. Yet most people never do. They trust their professors, textbooks, or romantic notions about professions gleaned from TV or movies. When you really think about it, you miss out on an incredible opportunity if you fail to research your career field by talking to people in it.

At the very least, people who conduct informational interviews will add valuable contacts to their networks, but many who conduct them also get unexpected job and internship offers – although one should never go into an informational interview with the idea of instigating an offer.

Q: What's the biggest mistake a job-seeker can make with networking?

A: Failing to express gratitude. A simple thank-you goes a long way in networking, and many networkers forget their manners.