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Networking: A Consumer Guide to an Effective Job Search

by Cecilia Gandolfo and Audrey Graham

Introduction

Finding a job is hard. On average it takes 10 - 20 calls to arrange an interview and 7 - 10 interviews to secure a job. Networking is a way to speed up the process, yet, while research has shown that networking is the best strategy, it is probably the most under-used tool by people with disabilities. There are two other important facts for you, the job seeker, to know: 1) there is a high rate of unemployment for people with disabilities, and 2) people with disabilities are more likely to rely on professionals for help with a job search than people without disabilities.

You can improve your job search by using a networking strategy. **Networking means talking with many people to learn about job openings faster**. It involves telling people about the kind of work you want to do, and about the past experiences you have had. It also means asking people about their work and employers, and requesting the names of other people who might be willing to offer information as well. This process lets you gather information and eventually provides you with opportunities to speak with prospective employers.

A study done at the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) showed that using a networking approach to find jobs for people with disabilities helped in three ways. People got jobs with better pay and more hours, and the job search took less time.

This brief is based on a two day networking workshop entitled "Building Community Connections: Designing A Future That Works." This training was developed by the ICI to teach people with disabilities who are seeking employment to become more active in the job search process.

How do you network?

The saying, "It is not what you know, it's who you know," is the basis for a networking strategy. When you are identifying your networks, include everyone you can think of, not just people who can hire you. Start by making a list of everyone you know including: family, friends, neighbors, counselors, past and present teachers, past and present co-workers, and employers. The most important thing is to come up with a list of people who know you well enough for you to have a conversation with them. These people are probably going to be willing to give you suggestions for your job search. This first group of people may simply introduce you to others, or they may offer specific help.

Networking really is okay!

Many people are resistant to this approach, but it is important for you, the job seeker, to understand three facts:

- 1. Networking is a widely accepted practice among people seeking employment**
- 2. You have a right to ask for help**
- 3. People like to help.**

Most books on job seeking have a section on using contacts. People expect you to ask for help because they, themselves have probably done the same, and everyone needs help at some time. Finally, most people feel good about being able to offer assistance to others.

If you are asking your network for direction and advice be sure your requests are specific and reasonable. Most of the time, if people are able to help, they will.

Using your network

Once you have identified your network, the next step is to let the people on that list know that you are doing a job search and tell them the type of job you are seeking. These people may be able to give you useful information on a specific job, a company. They may also introduce you to other contacts.

Eventually you will meet people who will connect you with employers or others who can provide real job leads, and from those connections, you can find out about:

- ✓ Current and future job openings
- ✓ Good and bad managers to work for
- ✓ Who in a company is best to talk to
- ✓ Other people to talk with who are doing a particular job that you would like to do
- ✓ Which companies/ departments are expanding or laying off
- ✓ People who know about the type of work/business you want to do
- ✓ Other types of jobs/ businesses that could use your skills.

You will not know how useful or willing any of your contacts are until you ask them. As you begin to develop contacts, it is important to think about the types of requests to make of these people.

Note: It is important to let everyone know that you are looking for a job, but don't ask contacts if they can hire you or if they know someone who can hire you. This question ends conversations quickly! If they have leads they will tell you about them.

What do I say and do?

Always ask if contacts know of companies that are hiring.

It is usually okay for you to ask them to pass your name on to someone who they know is hiring.

Tell people that you are looking for a job and describe the type of work you are interested in.

You should include a brief summary of related experiences & skills.

Let people know you want to talk with others who do this kind of work.

Contacts may be able to refer or introduce you to others who could be helpful in the job search. You might want to have an informational interview with these people.

Give your resume out to everyone if you have one.

Having people read your resume is helpful because they get to know you better. Ask people to pass it along to others too.

Remember: Not all of your contacts will be able to help you in your job search. Some people will provide better leads than others. Not everyone will have ideas on how to help. Suggestions will also vary depending on how close you are to your contacts.

Helpful hints for dealing with people you are referred to and know less well:

- ✓ Mention the name of the person who referred you, and explain why you are calling
- ✓ Ask if it is a good time to talk. If it is not, ask when a good time would be. You be responsible for calling back
- ✓ Offer to mail or fax your resume and ask for suggestions
- ✓ Leave an extra copy of your resume and ask them to pass it on to others who may be of assistance to you
- ✓ Ask for suggestions and names of people who can assist in your job search
- ✓ Ask if you may keep in touch to let them know how your search is going.

Informational Interview

Informational interviewing is a way to get your foot in the door to talk with people you know less well. The goal of this kind of interview is to learn about a type of job or a certain company, not to get a job.

Here are suggested questions for you to ask during informational interviews:

- ✓ Would you tell me about your job?
- ✓ How did you get started at this company or in this job?
- ✓ Is this a good company to work for?
- ✓ What is the typical work day like?
- ✓ Who would you recommend that I speak with to learn more about the company?
- ✓ Would it be possible to arrange a tour?

There are many benefits to informational interviews, as outlined below. They:

- ✓ are less stressful than job interviews
- ✓ increase your chance of getting job interviews
- ✓ give you a head start on the competition
- ✓ help you find out about how to enter a company through part-time or temporary options
- ✓ allow you to have face-to-face contact with people/employers
- ✓ lead to new contacts.

If you want to set-up an informational interview, start by listing the types of businesses or professionals you would like to talk with. Next, ask your network for specific contacts, or make a call and ask for an informational interview without a contact. When calling, you simply need to say that you would like to request time to talk with a person for an informational interview. Explain that you are doing a job search and would like to learn about the company.

If you are nervous about this process, ask for help from supports. They can practice the call with you, or someone could accompany you to the interview.

Maintain a positive relationship with people in your network

Networking means that you will meet and talk with many people. It is important to maintain a good relationship with them. Follow-up is part of that process and one way to do so is to send a thank you card. A thank you card or letter should be sent immediately after you meet with a person. Whether to send a card or letter matters little, but it is important to send something.

The goal of follow-up is not to overwhelm contacts, but rather to make them aware of your progress and to continue to get their suggestions if possible. Only keep in touch with contacts who say it is okay to do so. Phone follow-up is also a possibility, but again, only with permission. If your calling is okay with the person, follow-up with them after a month.

Tips for maintaining energy and progressing in your job search and networking

No matter what your approach is, a job search is slow and tedious work. Keeping track of your networking is a good way of maintaining energy in your job search as it keeps you directed. Below are some other useful hints:

- ✓ Make a list of all your contacts, starting with the ones that gave you the most useful leads. This allows you to track your job search process
- ✓ Keep reminding people that you are looking for a job, so they will tell you about any leads that turn up
- ✓ Design a contact follow-up plan, and follow-up on leads that you may have ignored
- ✓ If the connections that your network provided pay off, be sure to keep in touch with these people. Add them to your networking list
- ✓ Re-work your resume after 3 months if you get no interviews during that time

- ✓ Get support from other job seekers to sustain energy and build stamina
- ✓ Work on improving your writing and computer skills. This will increase your employment opportunities
- ✓ Try to improve how you talk about yourself. Include your skills, interests and hobbies in this discussion. Keep it positive.

Do whatever it takes to keep pushing ahead in your job search. Try to keep a positive outlook as that will help you present well to others.

Self-Advocacy

Being a self-advocate means speaking up for yourself and being assertive. Here are tips on how to do this when working with professionals:

- Be an active participant and give lots of input to your counselor
- Ask for what you want. If you have a clear idea of what you want, make sure you say it
- Approach different people. Everyone involved should know what you want (counselor/job club leader)
- Ask more than once. Don't be afraid to say what you want several times, especially if nothing is happening
- Ask why. If something is unclear or doesn't seem right, ask the person for an explanation
- Understand, don't accept. Patience and understanding are good, but it is fair to want to get help. If things go wrong and you feel your counselor is not willing to work with you, you have the right to question why
- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects people with disabilities and ensures that they will be treated fairly. Try to become familiar with your rights.

Conclusion

The time and energy you invest in your job search will pay off. Try to remain hopeful and keep the faith that your efforts will lead you to a good job.

When you find a job, AND YOU WILL FIND A JOB, don't forget to contact the people who helped you with your search. They will want to hear your good news. As a way of saying "thank you," remind these people that you are available to offer assistance to them if they need it.

Important Note:

Keep in mind how it felt to do a job search and to reach out to people. Remember what it was like to ask people in your network to give you assistance. They were there for you and now it is up to you to return the favor to someone else. You can be helpful to others going through a job search. They will be grateful to you just as you were to those who helped you.

For more information about the
Networking workshop, contact:
Institute for Community Inclusion/UAP
Children's Hospital
300 Longwood Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02115
(617) 355-6506 (v)
(617) 355-6956 (TTY)
ici@a1.tch.harvard.edu
www.childrenshospital.org/ici

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Liz Obermeyer of the Department of Mental Retardation, and Mary Anne Bedick, Jim Sarno, and clients of the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission in Somerville, Massachusetts for their help with this brief.