

Networking

Building your personal network

“The best time to network is when you’re not searching for a job,” noted Deb Rosenbloom, career and executive coach with Hancock Leadership Group. Great networkers embed networking in their day-to-day activities. They seek out advice from individuals both within and outside their own organization when taking on a new project, for example, or doing research, or preparing to meet with a new funder or business partner. They attend relevant networking events and keep contact information well organized (with notes on how they met). They look for opportunities to work on projects that will bring them in contact with peers at other organizations, including organizations and individuals outside of their direct areas of work.

By developing a network of relationships through the natural course of your work, you will feel less hesitant to reach out when you are in job-search mode. But there comes a point when you are ready to make a new career move, and need to both reach out to and continue to build your network.

Tim Butler, senior fellow and director of career development programs at the Harvard Business School, described two different types of networking that are part of a major career shift. “The first is part of the self-assessment process, when you begin to have a sense of the field you’d like to move into, and want to test out the reality of it. The second takes place when you have become quite clear on the direction in which you’d like to go, and are trying to move toward some specific job opportunities.”

Switching fields is challenging, especially in terms of telling a compelling story about why such a career shift makes sense. One senior nonprofit manager explained, “When making a shift across fields, you need to use the networking process to learn about what the new field values, what skills are most useful and transferable, and what jargon to use and avoid. I have talked to many would-be bridgers who can’t yet articulate how their past experience will make them a good fit for the sector.”

A nonprofit chief information officer noted, “I entered the sector late in my career, after 30-plus years in the for-profit world. Networking with former colleagues helped get me in the door at a couple of organizations. And because I was new to the sector, it was also very useful to have one or two people from whom I could learn the lingo, and with whom I could practice ‘telling my story.’”

If you have spent the bulk of your career in one sector or domain, you will likely have networks focused deeply in that area (and perhaps gaps in the area to which you want to move). But be creative. Develop a

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short list of organizations that interest you, and scrutinize each organization's staff, board, and even donor lists for anyone you know. Work in the other direction as well—ask people you know about their involvement on nonprofit boards or in volunteer capacities, or ask if they can think of others who have accomplished a similar cross-sector transition.

One bridger commented: "I was thinking about moving into the nonprofit sector, and as I talked with various people, I heard that a former high-tech colleague had done just that. I called him to learn more about his transition, and ended up both deciding that it was an exciting path to take and in fact pursuing a specific opportunity within his organization."

It's not always this straightforward, however. "What I often see, especially in cases of a major career shift, is discouragement about lack of connections in the field an individual would like enter," said Butler. "What you have to remember, though, is that this is a self-aggregating process. You have to focus on the one or two contacts that you do have, and trust that each conversation will lead to two or three more. Pushing forward in spite of discouragement and in spite of natural setbacks is so important."

Once you have begun to arrange informational interviews, the key is to "Prepare, prepare, prepare!" said Rosenbloom. "You asked for the meeting, you set the agenda." Make sure you have a clear opener that includes who you are (and who connected you), the career move you're contemplating, and perhaps most importantly, how he or she can help you (e.g., discuss how they made a similar transition, suggest an organization you might learn more about, or connect you to two to three additional people). "The more direct and the more specific you are, the easier it is for someone to help you," added Rosenbloom.

After the session, always follow up with a note, no matter how well you know the individual you spoke with, or how junior or senior they are. Start with an email—within 24 hours of the conversation if possible—and add a handwritten note within a week as well. It may feel like just one more thing you have to do at the end of a busy day (managing a job search while still being effective in your current organization is no small feat). However, "Not acknowledging someone's help—and promptly—can undo all your hard work," warned Rosenbloom.

Quick tips for successful networking

Prepare, Prepare, Prepare! Learn about the person you're contacting before you contact him or her, and make sure you have a clear statement of who you are and how the person can help. "The first 30- to 60-second impression you make can open doors (or close them)—so be prepared!" said Rosenbloom.

Keep the meeting convenient. Offer to come to the person's office for a 20- to 30-minute meeting. Inviting contacts out for lunch, or even coffee, may be done with good intentions but often is asking too much of them.

Be specific. Ask things like, "You've made the type of career transition I'd like to make, and I'd love to hear how you did it," or "Can you suggest any others that you think I should talk to as I continue my search?"

Look for contacts beyond your inner circle. Think about your schools, any and all jobs, volunteer, and board experiences, and other places or experiences where you have made real connections with people. Get systematic about it by dividing your life into categories and developing lists of relevant relationships in each category.

Attend "networking events." But only do this if you have a specific goal (e.g., meet a specific person speaking at the event). Going to an event and simply "wandering around" is ineffective and may hurt your confidence.

Make a cold call. If you can't find someone to introduce you to an organization you're passionate about, go ahead and cold call. In these cases, preparation is even more critical. Start with a concise introductory email and a follow-up call, but make sure you have done your research before you start.

Follow up quickly. Be prompt both when you thank people with whom you have spoken (ideally within 24 hours) and when you contact people whom others have recommended you meet (they may know about the referral and be expecting to hear from you). When possible, be concrete about how you have acted on suggestions someone has made, i.e., "Thank you for your advice and suggestions. I am already scheduled to meet Jane Doe next week."

It is important to remember that the networking process takes time. Expect to build a list or database of at least 50 people in your network; assume that you want to connect with at least three new people in a given week or make at least one good connection per networking event. Keep your list organized (you can keep a detailed spreadsheet for this purpose). Stay optimistic, and try to enjoy the process—the network you're building will be a great asset both now and for many years to come.

Bridgestar (www.bridgestar.org), an initiative of the Bridgespan Group, provides a nonprofit management job board, content, and tools designed to help nonprofit organizations build strong leadership teams and individuals pursue career paths as nonprofit leaders.