

Nervous about Networking?

By Scott Kukowski, PCM

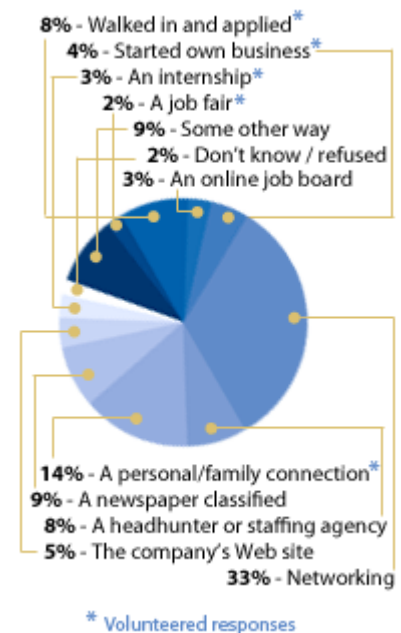
Today's job market requires you to think more creatively about your job search strategies. Gone are the days when employees had two or three offers sitting on the table to evaluate. It is an employer's market and they have the upper hand when it comes to recruiting talent. Today, plenty of people are looking for work, but not enough jobs exist for those seeking employment. As a result, networking is taking on a more important role in your job search strategy.

The number one strategy that people use to job hunt is searching online job boards. However, research from Bankrate, Inc., reveals that less than three percent of people land a job through this resource. I work with clients every day on job-search strategies, and can personally attest that online job boards are ineffective. Of all the people you know, how many have been successful in getting a job from an online job board? If you are like most of us, you do not know many people who have found a job this way. The intent of this article is not to bad-mouth online job boards—they serve a good purpose, which is to inform the public of job postings.

Many companies post their jobs on the big job sites (monster.com, careerbuilder.com, etc) because of company policy or it is a government requirement and/or they haven't found the right talent through the referral pool. These companies receive hundreds of applications online for each posting. It's overwhelming to scan through all of those résumés. For this reason, employers purchase technology that can automatically scan résumés and link them to open job postings without any human involvement.

Most employers find employees through referrals or networking. These companies put the word out through employees, colleagues, and friends. Many companies have found social networking to be quite effective, too. Networking tools such as LinkedIn.com and social networking sites like Facebook.com are becoming more and more instrumental to the recruiting process. According to Bankrate.com, more than 47% of people find jobs through friends, family, and other networking associates.

If you are looking for a job, having an established network is more important now than in the past. You need to identify your contacts, whether they are friends, family, business colleagues, or old school buds and reconnect with them using LinkedIn, for example. Once connected, you also need to learn how to reach out to these people to seek their assistance in your job search. Asking for help can be an intimidating process and most people shy away from it. Of course you are nervous. Even the most skilled networker gets nervous when starting to work a crowd. I, for one, have always had a difficult time walking into a crowded room and introducing myself to others. So what



did I do to overcome my anxiety? Nothing! Instead, I just didn't go to networking events. I avoided bars and social activities where I needed to meet people. My job search did not move forward.

The biggest obstacle for me at networking events tended to be the clickish groups of regulars that formed into little groups of three to five people. Were these people networking or were they just old friends talking? I suspect that many of these folks were friends and were not actually networking. They were protecting themselves from the anxiety of networking by hanging out with people they know. It appears almost everyone else is feeling the same way as I did—they are nervous to meet new people.

If you don't break the ice, who will? You will. Once you realize that everyone is feeling the same way and in the same boat as you, the pressure to perform is significantly reduced. So, you need to step up. Here are some suggestions on how to engage yourself to an individual or small group.

1. Be prepared. Have business cards available with your contact information (but for safety, do not include your home address).
2. Think about your icebreaker—your “pickup line” as they call it in the dating world.
 - a. Walk up and introduce yourself: “Hi, I’m so-&-so and I hope you don’t mind that I interrupted.”
or
 - b. Look for something interesting to discuss, such as someone’s cool shoes, bright tie, unique purse, or iPhone. Walk up and make your comment: “How do you like your phone?” or “I like your shoes. Where did you get them?” Remember, most people like to talk about themselves. Give them the chance to talk first.
or
 - c. Walk up, silently eavesdrop, and jump into the conversation: “I heard you talking about such-&-such. I’d like to know more about that.”
3. Make sure you take the opportunity to tell them your story or elevator pitch and something interesting about yourself. Your story should make you memorable, build perception, sell value, separate you from the competition, and present perceived quality. The story should answer three questions: 1) What do you do now?, 2) What can you bring to the organization?, and 3) What are you seeking and what value will you add?
4. Be prepared to hand out your business card. When networking, you should only hand out your business card to those who you spent time with. You want to be remembered by the people you talk to.

Networking doesn't have to be scary. Just ease yourself into it and you will be successful. Most jobs are filled through networking contacts, so spread the word and get yourself out there!

I'd love to hear some of your favorite icebreakers. Please comment on this article and share your experiences.

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