Top 6 Mistakes Job Seekers Make When Networking

Everyone knows the adage "It's not what you know, but who you know." Despite this, most people still seem reluctant to use networking as a strategy for building relationships, identifying customers, or finding jobs. When people think about networking, it often generates feelings of dread. At the very least, many people view networking as an unpleasant activity. Western culture encourages people to be independent, so networking can feel too much like asking for a handout. However, networking doesn't have to be awkward or painful if you do know how to do it. So, if you find yourself preferring to go to the dentist instead of making a new contact, then you are probably doing it wrong. The following are some mistakes to avoid when networking:
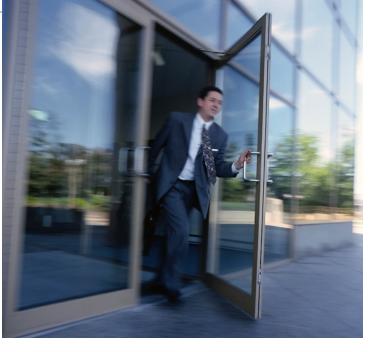
Appearing unfocused: It is important to have a clear purpose when approaching potential contacts. What information are you seeking? Are you looking for advice, information, or actual job leads? When you are asked the question, "What are you looking for?" Do you know what to say? Most people are willing to share information, but they can become disinterested if you do not know what you want.

Waiting until you need something: The best time to start networking is when you are not yet job searching. Asking people for information and advice feels more comfortable than asking outright for a job. Networking is also about building relationships, so connecting with people and sharing information when you don't need something creates a solid foundation. Then when you do find yourself needing to step up your job search, you can go back to your established network and let them know what you need.

Hiding behind technology: While the Internet can help you identify contacts, and social media and email can provide convenient ways to communicate, technology should not take the place of face-to-face interactions. Having hundreds of LinkedIn connections means nothing if you do not take the time to reach out and ask for conversations. Scheduling phone or Skype conversations and meeting for coffee or lunch provide opportunities for meaningful dialogue that technology is not able to replicate.

Presenting an unprofessional image: Your image matters even when you are not interviewing for a job. Posting unprofessional images on social media, or using inappropriate email addresses and phone greetings, give the impression that you are not ready for the professional world of work. Another turn-off is not dressing appropriately at conferences, business meetings and other networking events. Even a happy hour social gathering provides the opportunity to make a valuable connection, so consider what your appearance conveys about you. Another mistake is to not express gratitude for any information or assistance that is provided to you. Thanks can be expressed through a follow-up call or email letting them know what you did and how things turned out for you.

Your encounter will be made even more memorable by creating and carrying your own personal "business" cards that have your contact information on one side and a summary of your attributes on the back side.

So why is networking so important? According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 70% of jobs are filled by networking. The Wall Street Journal also indicates that 80% of job openings are unadvertised, and 90% are filled by employee referrals. Since networking is important for gathering information and contributing to others, be sure to avoid these common mistakes so that you can build and maintain relationships that will help you throughout your lifetime.

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Arriving late to events: Going to a networking event or social happy hour can be intimidating when you are not familiar with the program, organization, or participants. Nothing feels worse than walking into a crowded room of people who have already grouped together and are engaged in animated conversations. To make things more comfortable, arrive to your event a few minutes early, so that you can approach newcomers and help get the conversations started. If you decide to arrive with a colleague, make sure you don't clump together and appear unapproachable to others. Divide and conquer so that you each meet new people, and then reconnect by introducing each other to the new contacts you just made.

Overlooking chance encounters: Many people miss out on the chance encounters that happen in our daily lives. Shopping at the grocery store, waiting for a car repair, or watching your kid's soccer game, all provide opportunities for conversations (including networking) to take place. Be prepared to explain briefly what you do and what you are looking for but don't dominate the conversation. Networking is a two-way street, so learn about your contact by listening and asking follow-up questions. You never know when your paths may cross again or when you have a reason to reach out.

Nobody trips over mountains. It is the small pebble that causes you to stumble. Pass all the pebbles in your path and you will find you have crossed the mountain. ~Author Unknown