

Overcome the "I Hate Networking" Syndrome!

By John Hadley

I often encounter people who aren't very comfortable with networking, or claim they are, but just never seem to find the time to do it.

Some of the reasons I hear include:

- I don't like "marketing" myself.
- I'm not a people person.
- It's a waste of time; everyone I know knows the same people.
- I'm just too busy.
- Networking is so "intentional", I feel like I have an ulterior motive.

I find that these are often just excuses for someone who has never learned effective networking skills or isn't really in touch with the vast benefits they can obtain from networking.

I have to confess, I was pretty shy growing up. Then I became an actuary, and found myself among thousands of other "socially challenged" professionals. I was often told that the outgoing actuary was the one who looked at YOUR shoes while he talked to you.

It all started to change when I went to my first actuarial club meeting. I naturally gravitated to those I knew from work, or had met taking exams. They introduced me to a few people from other companies, who I started to see at other functions, and who introduced me to others, etc., and before I knew it, I had built a substantial network of contacts effortlessly. And I found I really enjoyed outside functions more because I could almost always count on running into someone I knew!

The first step to overcoming "networking reluctance" is to examine carefully the source of your reluctance. For example, if you "don't like marketing", why do you think of networking as marketing? Networking is really about building relationships, so perhaps you simply have a false assumption as to what you are trying to achieve.

Next, get really clear about what it could do for you.

Networking allows you to:

- Tap into the expertise of others.
- Bring a lot more value to your employer, by bringing fresh, outside perspectives and others' real life experiences, into the discussions at hand.
- Get ideas and find out new ways to tackle old problems.
- Learn about interesting opportunities, both internal and external.
- Find out more about what's going on in your own company and the key challenges being faced in various areas.
- Discover ways you can add more value to your organization.
- Uncover entirely new opportunities for yourself.

So now let's say you decide to go out and do some networking. You sign up to go to an association meeting, but as it approaches you start to get sweaty palms. Lower the bar. Set a realistic goal for the networking event that you can buy into and feel comfortable with - say, talking with at least three people you haven't met before. Now you will have more focus, and you will be able to relax when you've achieved your goal.

Just try it. It gets easier with practice, as you build your "networking muscles". And soon you may find it's actually fun!

For more on effective networking, you can find two articles on the do's and don'ts of effective networking that I wrote for previous issues of *The Stepping Stone* at www.JHACareers.com/ArticlesNetworking.htm. ●



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