



How To Sabotage Your Career Networking

by John West Hadley

Networking is one of the most important activities you can engage in to advance your career. This is how you build the contacts that will bring you new opportunities, point you to valuable resources and serve as mentors throughout your career. And if you are in an active career search, your network and your ability to use it effectively to further your search are absolutely critical!

Let's look at how to make the most of your career search networking activities. Here are five common obstacles:

A weak psychology: People respect confidence. Don't just walk into a networking situation unprepared. Spend time in advance setting goals. Imagine the goal you want to achieve from each networking event, networking call or one-on-one networking meeting. Then go in confident that you will achieve that goal.

The wrong goals: Job seekers often assume that the point of networking is to find out whether the other person knows of any openings, and they ask point blank. Even if there is an appropriate opening in my company, if I'm not particularly excited about you, if you haven't built some real rapport with me, I may never tell you about it. And a "frontal assault" is going to make me think long and hard about how I'm willing to help you.

On the other hand, if you do a good job of laying the groundwork, describing to me the package you have to offer, showing your passion and building the rapport that gets me to want to help you, I'll volunteer any possibilities I may know of.

You should have two primary goals for every career search networking meeting:

1. Describe the package you have to offer, and what you are looking for next, so that I know exactly how to help you.
2. Get referrals to others you can talk to. This is how you build a growing spider web of contacts that begins to catch openings for you.

Asking for help in finding a job: As soon as you ask me something that smacks of "help me find a job," the entire psychology of the meeting changes. You've now asked me for a big favor, to do the work for you, and unless I'm a good friend, my guard is up. And even then, I'm now feeling pressured. If I'm not able to help you, you're going to be disappointed.

Whatever I might provide you is now being filtered. I'm no longer going to provide you leads to people who I don't think have openings, or where I'm not sure you would be a strong fit, because I think that won't "help you find a job." I may have no idea that the person in the next office is thinking of adding to staff. Or has a serious challenge that he'd love help with, if the right person with the right set of skills happens to tap into it. And now it won't even occur to me to connect you to him.

ANYONE you speak to could be a valuable contact—the person who works in the shipping department may be friendly with the head of the marketing department, and be able to introduce you. And anyone can expand your knowledge and understanding of the company and its issues, giving you a broader perspective to draw on when you finally are in front of the potential hiring manager.

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Worrying about the quid pro quo: This relates back to your confidence. Job seekers often tell me, “*Why should anyone meet with me, when I have nothing to offer them?*” Here are just three possible reasons:

1. Smart business people are always on the lookout for talent. If you happen to fill a need they have (or anyone has) at their company, that’s a value you have allowed them to provide to the company. Plus, you will become a valuable contact for them in the company, an ally who is very willing to help them out when needed.
2. Most people love to give advice, so you are valuing them simply by asking for their advice.
3. You are helping them network painlessly, and will now become a resource they could draw upon for help sometime in the future.

And who knows, in the brainstorming you have with them, you may end up providing them some insights they hadn’t thought of that DO provide immediate value.

Not being prepared! No one likes to feel like their time is being wasted. You are wasting my time if you come to a meeting with me, and you:

- have no agenda,
- have a poorly thought out or poorly presented description of the package you have to offer,
- can’t tell me what you are looking for and it feels like you are just on a fishing expedition,
- have no idea what I do, what my company does, or what the job you are interested in involves.

It’s only OK to have some of those things poorly defined, if part of your **explicitly communicated** agenda is to have me help you define it. How often has someone told you they want to be “an actuarial,” and clearly knows little about what actuarial work involves. Nothing turns me off more than that! On the other hand, if you walk in telling me what you’ve heard about the actuarial profession, and admitting that you really don’t know much about it and seek my experience and guidance in helping you evaluate whether it might be a fit for your background, I’m going to be very open to brainstorming with you on that.

Finally, be patient. Don’t get trapped into avoiding networking contacts because you don’t know where they will lead. If the contact leads to one more person out there who knows what you are capable of bringing to the table, who has their antennae up as they hear about possible leads that might be a fit for you, that is a huge win. You never know where the contact will come from. Look at my own example: a casual conversation with someone I’d never met before at an SOA meeting in Montreal led directly to five years of full-time consulting assignments in New York City that jump-started my career in an entirely new direction! **□**



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