Networking During COVID-19

If the thought of networking makes you groan, I understand. It's a system that rewards people who lucked into having influential contacts, and employers who prioritize hiring people from their own networks often land candidates with similar backgrounds and perspectives rather than cultivating diversity that can help companies succeed. But it's also prevalent across many employers.

Of course, networking can feel awkward, even without a pandemic forcing us to conduct most of our communication over videoconferencing apps. But there are ways to become more comfortable doing it.

Marcia Ballinger, co-founder of Ballinger | Leafblad, an executive search firm in St. Paul, Minn., and co-author of "The 20-Minute Networking Meeting." She explains how you can make networking work for you during the pandemic. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Why should you network during a pandemic?

The vast majority of jobs are obtained through networking. Don't let the pandemic be an excuse not to network — it's as important as it has ever been.

Every single person I interview, they say, "Well, I got this job because I followed my old boss," or, "A former colleague called me." Networking is typically not going to lead to a job where it's posted and there's a hundred other applicants. Networking leads to a job where you're a pool of one or only a few. The odds are so much better, and the best thing you could possibly do in a job transition is play the odds.

Spend 80% of your time networking, only spend 10% of your time calling recruiters and 10% of your time peeking at online postings. That will triple or quadruple your likelihood of success.

Do you have any tips for networking right now?

Be considerate and do all the logistical legwork. If someone agrees to give you 20 or 30 minutes to meet, you meet at a time convenient for them. Give them a month to choose a date and time that works for them, as well as the format. If they like Skype, you better know how to use Skype. If they prefer GoToMeeting, you should know how to use it.

Take responsibility for setting up the meeting and sending them an invite, in addition to a reminder the day before. It actually makes you feel more powerful when you invite a person into your space and you take this off their plate.

It can also help to make virtual networking meetings similar to meetings you had before the pandemic. You could send over a $5 Starbucks card ahead of time to treat them to a cup of coffee the same way you would have a year ago.

How should you prepare for a networking meeting?

You can avail yourself of all sorts of YouTube videos that will teach you how to set up your camera and make your room look nice. That's a no-brainer.

In addition to all of that, you should do some research on the person you're hoping to connect with. Visit their website and LinkedIn page and do a Google search to learn whether you have any connections. For example, you might belong to the same youth soccer parents' club or have graduated from the same university. Then you can reference these connections when you reach out.

Is there anything you should avoid doing during a networking meeting?

The one thing never to ask for in a networking meeting is a job. The request of a networking meeting is always "I'm seeking some wisdom from your background." Everyone has wisdom and they love to share it. The job comes two or three weeks later, when they see a role posted in their organization and think of you.

In addition, you shouldn't talk about yourself, hardly at all. Work on your one-minute personal narrative, and spend the rest of the time seeking wisdom.

Do you have any tips specifically for students?

People that are far along in their career have a soft spot for assisting students. I would encourage young people not to shy away from networking, because most people seek to assist those who are coming up behind them in their profession. Young people might start to develop a network by participating actively in online groups or writing blogs. Participating online can help you make networking contacts.

Do you have advice for more experienced workers who may find themselves without a job for the first time in many years?

Experienced workers are used to having to-do lists, and you can approach networking that way too. For example, you can say to yourself, "Every day I'm going to make five new contacts, I'm going to call two new people, I'm going to make three comments online." Networking can become your action items, and it can help you feel, in some ways, a little more in the game.

Should people who are happily employed take time to network?

Now is a phenomenal time to network inside your organization, especially if there are question marks about who's going to be kept and who's not. Take time to set up calls and network internally, especially now that we don't come across colleagues at the water cooler.

Have you heard of any recent networking success stories?

I spoke to a very skilled senior nursing supervisor last week. Finding the time in the midst of the pandemic, she committed to three 20-minute networking meetings per week. Within four weeks, she had a job as a director of nursing, and it was much more to her taste in terms of hours and focus. She asked her connections, "Where might you see me plugging in?" It was such a powerful question. All of a sudden, she had 25 people helping her who would be happy to recommend her — not because of the way she talked about herself, but because of the way she demonstrated herself during the meetings.

Do you have any final thoughts for our readers?

Networking teaches transferable skills. Once you have your one-minute narrative for a networking meeting, that's the same narrative you can take to a phone interview and large group events. And once you get into the habit of asking wisdom-seeking questions, that skill can be applied at the end of an interview when someone asks, "What questions do you have for me?" Much of the energy and tactics around networking apply to all parts of managing career and job transitions.