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TOOLING UP CAREER ADVICE



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Three Networking Scenarios, Part One: Making the Best of Your Business Contacts

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There is a perception among some job seekers that networking is a nasty part of the job hunt, best managed by those who have some kind of innate flair for telephone work. My belief is that this is a complete misconception.

"Networking is quite a subtle skill," one scientist told the audience at a recent career seminar in which I participated. "Some people, notably salespeople and outgoing types, have the capacity to get into discussion with all kinds of people who can benefit them. It appears so easy for these few. For the rest of us, we have to struggle. We sound and feel like rank amateurs."

This scientist had been experiencing a tough time in his local job market. He didn't see many advertised jobs; it frustrated him to keep hearing the same advice from nearly everyone whom he spoke with.

"Get back out there," I told him. "Even though there aren't a lot of advertised positions in your city right now, there are still jobs that are being filled. Writers call this the 'hidden job market' and you'll need to be in the networking pipeline to reach these. Make sure that people know you and your unique capabilities. Seriously, you just never know when you'll get a call or an e-mail lead that sends you down the right path."

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As the seminar turned to other subjects, I could see the frustration on the face of the scientist I had been addressing. "Network, network, network" is just so much slick advice until you discover that the process isn't all that complicated. It's *difficult* but it's not *complicated*. Sound strange? Job-seeking networking is an inherently simple process but one that is very difficult to carry to completion. That's why in this month's column I have decided to take networking apart in order to reveal the nitty-gritty details--and to show you that it isn't salesmanship that wins the day. It is genuineness, courtesy, and good listening skills!

Telephone Networking Calls

As you read the exchanges that take place in my three networking scenarios (one in this column and two in its continuation next month) you'll recognize that the choice of language might work well for me, but it obviously needs to be personalized with your own details using words that you are comfortable with. It's risky for a career advisor to suggest that you study scripts because the tendency is to over-rely on them; this preparation becomes quite noticeable to the professional interviewer. In this case, I have determined that scripts are required in order to illustrate my point. Networking isn't the complicated process of salesmanship that you might have thought.

Before beginning, here are a few of the golden rules of networking. Take note of them as you are reading through the scenarios that follow:

- Networking is not something that you do *to* someone. It could be defined as the process of establishing links of communication with others in a way that may prove to be mutually beneficial.
- This is not a selfish act done only when you need something from someone. It is a lifelong skill and an art as important as any other in the field of interpersonal communications. If you know how to write a paper and give a presentation, than you should know how to network.
- Never push yourself into uninvited territory for more than 3 minutes. If you find that the personal chemistry is not working for you, cut it short and move on. Diligently respect the other party's time and their right not to be disturbed if it isn't a good time.

Scenario #1: A Call to a "Peer +2"

Some people assume that the really important networking calls are to hiring managers or those who are really high up in the org chart. This couldn't be more wrong. The single most important call you can make is to a person who is just a bit further along in their career than you. Someone who is 2 to 3 years ahead will have empathy for your situation. Their own experiences will be very fresh on their mind, and they are far more likely to be your eyes and ears in the organization than the director of research. This is one such example.

Janice, our job-seeking postdoc, has been given the name of a scientist at ABC Biotechnology, a local employer who has hired a number of graduates of her alma mater. She has only the slimmest of connections to this scientist.

Janice: Dr. Brown, I'm Janice Feldman, a postdoc over at the Smith lab. Susan Wu, the lab manager here, remembers you as a first-rate protein chemist during your graduate studies. Is it possible that you have a brief moment for a question, or am I catching you at a bad time?

Dr. Richard Brown: That's fine. I have a few minutes yet before a meeting. But please call me Richard. What's up?

Janice: Thank you Richard. The reason for my call is that I'm doing a bit of research for an upcoming move that I am going to make into industry and I'd love your advice on one matter. The lack of job advertisements in the local paper can be frustrating, and yet I know that companies like ABC are always on the lookout for good people. Can you tell me a bit about how you happened to make the move to industry? I think that I have some misperceptions about how the hiring process works, and I'd love you to walk through how it worked for you and ABC.

Richard: Janice, would you like a contact in the human resources department? That's really where the hiring occurs. I'm just a Scientist 2 at the company, and I don't have any direct supervision yet, although that may change in the next few months.

Janice: I'd love the HR contact, Richard. But what I'd really like to hear is how you made the introduction yourself. Did the company find you through an advertisement, or was it an on-campus recruiting event? How did you make the transition, anyway?

Richard: That's a funny story. I applied three times to the company and never heard anything except the obligatory postcard response. And those were for jobs I had seen advertised and that I fit! Later, I was at the ASBMB meeting when I ran into Tony Morton from the Protein Chemistries group in the elevator at the Marriott. He had just given a talk that I was interested in and we started up a nice conversation. Later, Tony asked me to write him and when I did I was invited in for an interview. The weird thing is that I met the HR manager for my job offer discussion and she knew nothing about my previous three applications and had never seen my CV before. She had been told that Tony had recruited me at the ASBMB. ...

Janice: Sounds like the personal contact with Tony was what really did it. Protein chemistry is my niche as well, Richard. In fact, according to Susan, we've worked in some similar areas of research.

Richard: Tell me a little about yourself, Janice, and I'd be happy to assist you in any way that I can here. But before I forget, that HR contact is Ricky Jennings, at extension 290.

In Conclusion: The Job Market Always Looks Bad

The job market stinks. Here's the strange part ... the job market *always* stinks. No matter what degree you graduate with, you'll find a poor-to-mediocre job market awaiting you (unless you've picked just the right discipline and you come from just the right lab). And because you probably don't have today's lucky combination, you are going to need networking skills. That's why it is so important to begin practicing this critical skill area right now.

Networking obviously goes far beyond the telephone. But what a wonderful instrument that unappreciated little device becomes in the hands of someone who knows how to use it to gain access to information and make new friends at the same time.

You'll find two more scenarios for your review next month. Go networker, go!

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