

NETWORKING: IT'S THE WAY TO GROW

by Joyce Oliner

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So, you've taken that deep breath and jumped off the deep end, leaving behind the security of an HR position within a larger organization to set out on your own as a consultant. You relish the freedom and flexibility that come from working for yourself, and you don't miss those incessant phone calls from your more annoying internal clients.

But wait—actually, you DO miss those calls. You need your phone to ring with new business if this consulting venture is going to be successful. How are you going to get your name out in the community as someone who is available to provide top-quality consulting services? The answer is simple—you need to start networking.

Some people are born networkers. They see a room full of strangers as a buffet table of business prospects. But for many of us, the prospect of meeting new people with a view to

gaining business is about as appetizing as making an appointment for a root canal. Here are some common concerns expressed by new networkers:

- I don't know how to talk to new people about what I do.
- I don't want to waste other people's time.
- I don't know where to go to network.
- Networking seems like a waste of time—I don't see results.

While these may seem like daunting obstacles at first, with practice and a couple of those deep breaths, you can overcome them all and network like a pro.

Know what you're selling

When you meet a prospective client or a potentially useful contact, you're probably not going to have enough time during which to explain the services you provide and why you should be hired. So it pays to know in advance how you would briefly describe what you do, and what makes your services stand out from the crowd.

"I help companies get the most out of their workforce and minimize their legal risk," is much more likely to spark interest and provoke follow-up on questions than a bland, "I'm an HR training consultant." Once you have your listener's interest, you can go on to give more detail. And say it like you

mean it. If you don't sound confident about your services, you won't inspire the confidence in others that is essential to successful networking.

Provide something of value

You won't have to worry about wasting other people's time if you cultivate the habit of finding ways to offer value to those you meet. The most successful networkers are those who have learned how to listen actively and identify opportunities. If the HR executive you're chatting with at a networking event tells you he's struggling to reconcile pay grades within his company, don't mentally switch off because you're not a compensation specialist.

Instead, ask yourself how you could be helpful. Do you know a great compensation consultant you could refer him to? Did you just read an article about a related issue that you could offer to send him?

Sometimes you need to read between the lines—is he just struggling with a tough compensation issue, or is he really flagging that he's looking for a new position? And do you know of an opening you could point him toward?

You won't always be able to provide assistance, but when you can, you accomplish at least two goals—first, you have shown yourself to be a connection worth keeping, and second, you've given yourself a great opportunity

to follow up with your new contact, reinforcing the professional link that may one day result in new business.

Be open to networking opportunities

For some people, networking conjures up visions of professional conferences, and not much else. But when you're thinking about how to develop a network of professional contacts and prospective clients, it's essential to think broadly.

Yes, you should join ASTD and other relevant professional associations, and attend the local and national meetings they offer. As an even better option, try and secure a more visible role at a meeting, either as a speaker or an organizer. You also shouldn't be shy about asking other consultants what networking venues they find to be the most productive. You may be surprised how willing they are to help the newbie, and you'll know to "pass it forward" when you have a chance to lend a hand to someone else starting out.

Don't overlook some other prime, yet perhaps less obvious, networking opportunities. That five-hour flight to visit your college roommate across the country? Try chatting with the person in the seat next to you about why they're flying and what they do when they're not in the air.

What about your former classmates at that dreaded class reunion, or the other parents shivering on the sidelines of your first-grader's weekly soccer game? Obviously, a hard sell approach would be inappropriate in these social situations, but it's perfectly acceptable to mention the kind of work you do and to ask about the professional interests of those around you. You never know what business development seeds you'll be able to plant until you try to get them in the ground.

The Internet also opens up new realms for networking. We have all worked with many different colleagues over the years, colleagues who may be great sources of referrals for us. Reaching out to let those contacts know what you are doing these days is a snap using any of the abundant business-oriented social networks such as LinkedIn. You'll be amazed at how delighted people are to hear from you and how interested they are in your new professional role.

Don't expect instant results, and do expect to work hard

Many new networkers become discouraged when their networking efforts don't translate immediately into tangible results. It's certainly easy to become disheartened, especially when the time you spend on networking is shoehorned into an already overcrowded schedule.

But don't give up; understand that it takes many networking efforts to generate a piece of actual business. Think of each networking effort as a small piece of a bigger structure—your professional network—that will over time establish your credibility and reputation.

The hours you spend networking are every bit as important as the time you spend doing work for clients, and you need to be equally disciplined about how you spend your networking time. Set yourself some challenging but attainable goals, and stick to them.

If you decide, for example, that you are going to secure one speaking engagement for the next calendar quarter, and have one in-person networking meeting each week, you are much more likely to follow through and achieve those goals than if you simply have a vague plan to "get your name out there."

Networking seems daunting to many people when they first start out. But if you can inject some planning and a lot of enthusiasm, you will find it both professionally and personally rewarding.

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WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Notice is hereby given that sealed proposals will be received by Macomb Community College, Purchasing Department, in Warren, MI until 3:00 p.m. November 20, 2008 for implementation of a **Workforce Development Management System**. The system will be a web based (externally hosted) technology tool for the management of contract education and open registration projects and programs. A RFP document is now available for examination and distribution at (purch@macomb.edu) or call (586) 445-7308.

Dennis Costello
Purchasing Administrator