

## CHAPTER 6

# Establishing and Cultivating Your Network

*“You don’t have to be a wildly extroverted, life-of-the-party  
type to build a great network of informants....*

*You simply need a systematic approach.”*

**W**hen I was in a job search early in my career, I learned from a member of my network about an opening that had not been advertised. When I called the organization to inquire, the first question was “How did you know about this?” Identifying my contact boosted my credibility—and soon I was offered an interview and subsequently the job. By the way, I had never actually met the person who told me about the opening. He was simply a friend of a former boss who

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was willing to pass along a valuable piece of information to someone he knew only via a resume and a brief phone conversation.

Your ability to get a job depends on several variables: your track record in the positions you’ve held so far, your skill at identifying openings, the strength of your resume and cover letter, your interviewing skills, the quality of your references, and your salary aspirations.

But none of these comes close to the importance of your network. Your network is made up of people who know you are ready for a new opportunity and can possibly contribute to that effort. These people include current and former colleagues, friends, and—very important—colleagues of colleagues and friends of friends (and colleagues of friends and friends of colleagues—people whom you do not yet know but will soon meet and add to your network).

## Why a network is so valuable

Your network—or, more precisely, the people you put into your network—can do several things for you.

- **Identify openings that might interest you.** No one person—not even the most highly regarded search consultant in town—knows of all job openings. But everyone knows of at least one opening. It might be at this person’s own organization or at one where a friend, colleague, spouse, or partner works. It might be because this person noticed an ad about the opening. It might be because the organization with the opening has asked this person to help identify candidates. Regardless of the reason, everyone knows about some opening somewhere.

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- **Put in a good word on your behalf.** Because so many employers depend on recommendations from trusted sources, you significantly increase your chances of being invited for an initial interview when a member of your network can recommend you. Then, once you've had an interview or two, this person may be able to serve as a reference. This assumes, however, that the person knows your work well and can speak authoritatively. I don't take this for granted since many people in your network will be recent acquaintances who are not appropriate references, even though they can do other useful things.

- **Provide intelligence about potential opportunities.** They can give you insights into a particular organization, position, or person—insights that will help you tailor your pitch and even help you decide whether some openings are worth pursuing. Many jobs sound great on paper, especially at places with attractive public images. But a member of your network can discreetly tell you about lesser-known internal characteristics that are important to know.

- **Keep your spirits up.** Looking for a job is rarely easy; you should expect scores, or even hundreds, of disappointments before the search ends successfully. There will be some moments—especially if you're without a job—when you just need to be in touch with another person who's not going to turn you away. By simply talking to you and trying to be useful, people in your network can help you remain positive and keep moving ahead.

You don't have to be a wildly extroverted, life-of-the-party type to build a great network of informants. And you don't need a bulging Rolodex at the outset of your search. You sim-

ply need a systematic, disciplined approach to identifying people who might be helpful and a willingness to take the initiative to remind them periodically that you're still looking.

### Creating and working an effective network

**1. Write out a list of 40 people.** These should be the individuals who are best equipped to tell you about openings, provide general intelligence, put in a good word at the right moment, or help keep your spirits up. Obviously, you should exclude people who, if they knew you were searching, could leave you vulnerable at work. In any case, consider people who:

- work where you currently work,
- worked with you in previous jobs,
- used to work where you work now,
- know you through professional associations or alumni groups,
- know you through community activities,
- got to know you in college or graduate school, or
- live in your neighborhood.

Coming up with 40 names might seem daunting at first, but don't be discouraged if it takes more than a few minutes to put together a list. This exercise is most useful when it stretches your thinking beyond the obvious group of colleagues and friends.

The key: Think broadly, but place the most emphasis on the 40 people who are both most willing to help you and best positioned to be useful.

**2. Write to the 40 people on your list.** I suggest sending each one a personalized letter (by mail or email). Do this



"IN MY NETWORK OF PEERS  
AND COLLEAGUES YOU'RE A  
PRIME TIME SITCOM."

over a four-week period. Write to the first 10 during the first week, the second 10 the next week, and so on. Enclose your resume along with a brief cover letter explaining what you'd like to do next and your hope that they can help identify potential openings or other people you should contact. Close the letter by saying you'll follow up in a few days with a phone call.

Make it clear that you are not asking them for a job. Since

most will not have an opening that matches your skills and experience, you don't want them to misinterpret your request, say they have nothing, and shut the door.

**3. Call to schedule a short talk—in person, if possible.**

Ask if you can meet for a brief (20- to 30-minute) conversation. If a face-to-face meeting is not possible, talking by phone is an acceptable, albeit less than ideal, alternative.

If you can meet the individual in person, suggest doing it over coffee, not over lunch or another meal. You should be busy talking, listening, and taking notes, none of which is easy to do while eating. In addition, finding time for coffee (which can take place at any time of day) is much easier than scheduling lunch, and you'll also take less of your contact's valuable time.

**4. Ask about openings or further contacts.** For your meeting, take another copy of your resume in case your contact doesn't bring the original along. Open the conversation by describing your objectives: what your ideal next job would be like or perhaps your primary one or two areas of interest. Then ask your contact if he or she knows of any openings that might meet those objectives.

If the person does have an opening or two to tell you about, get all the particulars and find out whether you can or should mention the person by name if you decide to pursue the openings. But don't be surprised or disappointed if the person has little or nothing to offer. Even when contacts don't know of a potential opening now, they may hear about something a few days later and will likely remember to tell you.

Whether your contacts suggest openings or not, also ask them the key question that will help you build your network:

“Can you identify at least three other people whom I should contact to discuss my search?” Like the initial 40 members of your network, these do not have to be people with jobs to offer. They just need to be useful members of your network. Find out the relationship your contact has with each person and whether you should use the contact’s name when you write the new person to ask for a meeting.

**5. Repeat the contact cycle with the new names.** Send your letter and resume via mail or email, follow up by phone, meet over coffee, pursue leads of possible openings and new names to contact. If after a month you’ve talked to all 40 people on your initial list and each has given you three names, you will have 120 new names. That’s a total of 160 people in your network, many of whom you did not know at the outset. Even if you reach only half of your initial 40 and each of these 20 people gives you only two names, you’ll have 40 new names to add to the initial 40. Keep this up for a few months and the numbers will continue to expand. You may even have trouble following up in a timely way with all the new names that continue to emerge and the suggestions that each person offers.

That’s when you know your network is working.

Of course, you shouldn’t pester the members of your network or waste their limited and valuable time. That’s why you get your letter and resume to them before calling and why you want to meet briefly over coffee instead of lunch. But don’t let the relationship stop there. As helpful as your contacts want to be, they don’t wake up each morning asking themselves, “What can I do today to help that person I talked to last week find the right job?” Many will forget, so it’s important to remind them periodically that you’re still looking.

After you complete the initial round with contacts, send them an email every 60 days or so to quickly let them know that you haven’t yet found the right job and to see if they have new ideas. I found one of the best jobs of my career when I informed one of my contacts, for the third time over the course of several months, that I was still looking. He had several helpful suggestions the first two times, but none had materialized into the right fit, and neither had anyone else’s. But this third time he told me, “Glad you called. Yesterday we announced the creation of a new organization and the appointment of its first executive director. She’ll be looking for a deputy; let me pass your material to her.” I got that deputy job a few weeks later.

If you have qualms about contacting people, here’s a simple plan to help you overcome this reluctance. Establish a routine in which you commit to doing the following every day, Monday through Friday:

1. Call at least five people per day.
2. Email at least five people per day.
3. Meet face-to-face at least two people per day.
4. Remind them. Check in every two months.

I can assure you that almost everyone in your network will want to help. Some will be of marginal benefit or even useless. A few will actually be very helpful. One will be of incalculable value. So establish, build, and cultivate your network with confidence.

**6. Network through relevant social networking websites, e.g. LinkedIn.com.** These have quickly become popular ways for people to find and stay in touch with each other. Though no substitute for face-to-face interaction or even phone con-

versations, they are a useful way to find people who should be in your network, and to stay in touch with those people. Just don't send inquiries and updates at an annoying rate.

### **After you find the job you want**

Even when you end your search, your network will still have value. It will include some people who might be helpful colleagues in your new job and many who will be useful in your next search—which you hope won't be soon, but one never knows. So don't abandon this new set of contacts once you're done looking. At a minimum, send them all a note when you complete your search, tell them how it ended, and thank them for their help.

The network I'm advising you to create is designed to build a group of people who know you're in the market and will tell you about opportunities you might not hear about otherwise. The steps listed above to create, expand, and maintain the network focus on continually adding new people—people who are valuable for many reasons, not because they are likely to offer you a job.

In creating and expanding your network of contacts, your goal is to let everyone know—to the maximum extent possible—that you're available. The only limitation should relate to your current employment situation. You obviously don't want to inform somebody about your search if the news will get back to your office, and especially your supervisor. Given how few degrees of separation exist between people, you do need to ask your contacts to be discreet. The conventional wisdom is that it's better to look for a job when you have a job, but there are clear advantages to looking when you don't have one. One

is the freedom to be explicit with everyone about your goals.

You've heard the saying "It's not what you know—it's who you know." But in finding the right job, "It's not who you know—it's who knows you." Networking is the best way to quickly expand the number of people who know you and know you're available.

#### ***The Value of a Network***

1. Identifies other people to add to your network.
2. Identifies job openings.
3. Recommends you to potential employers.
4. Gives you insights into the job market, specific organizations, and openings.
5. Keeps your spirits up.

#### ***Creating Your Network***

1. Identify 40 people.
2. Write to them; then talk to them.
3. Ask them to identify openings you should investigate.
4. Ask them to recommend three people to add to your network.

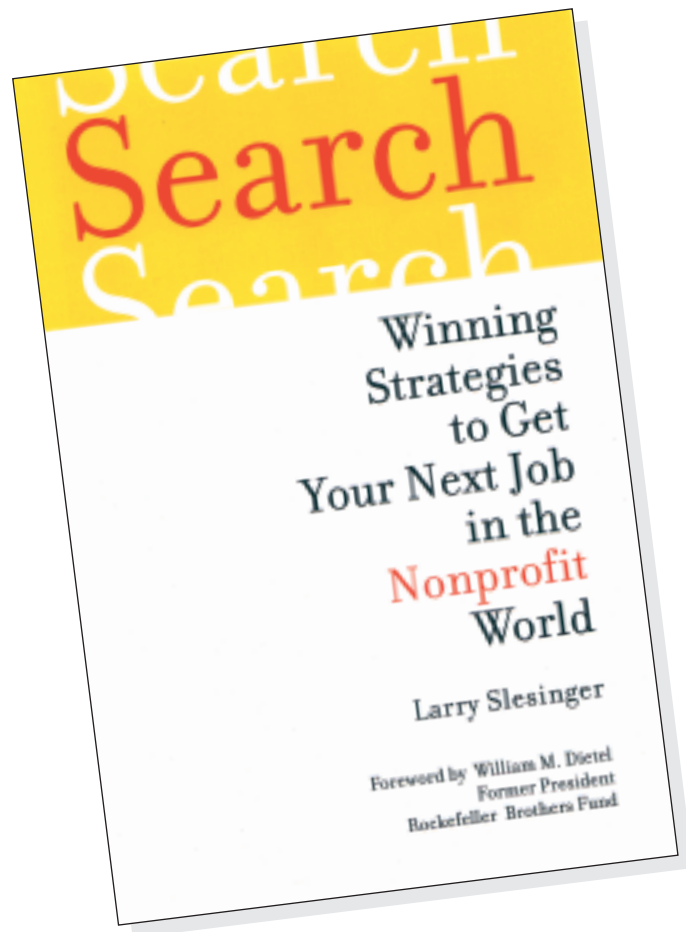
Repeat Steps 2 to 4 until the search is over.

#### ***Maintaining Momentum***

Each week:

1. Call five people per day.
2. Email five people per day.
3. Meet with two people per day.
4. Remind everyone in your network every 60 days that you're still looking.

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This chapter is adapted from the book *Search: Winning Strategies to Get Your Next Job in the Nonprofit World*. See next page for Table of Contents. The book is available at [SlesingerManagement.com](http://SlesingerManagement.com).

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