

# Networking Tips For Shy Job Seekers

By **L. MICHELLE TULLIER**

*From the National Business Employment Weekly*

Unfortunately for introverted people, it's getting more and more difficult to succeed professionally without developing a broad range of connections to other people. There simply is no such thing as a job or career field in which you can be rewarded entirely for what you know and how well you do your work. You not only have to do your job well but also make sure that others know you're doing your job well.

This is especially true if you're self-employed. Word-of-mouth publicity is widely regarded as one of the keys to running just about any type of small business or consulting practice. Remember, it's not just what you know that counts, it's who knows that you know what you know.

Visibility is key. This can be trying for introverts who would rather focus on their work than on their relationships at work. And it can be downright painful for shy types who cringe at the thought of self-promotion.

There's good news and bad news for introverted or shy professionals. The bad news is that networking as a means of career survival is here to stay. The good news is that networking is definitely a skill that can be learned.

The following tips will make the process less painful.

## **1. Take baby steps.**

Don't try to become a master networker overnight. A common mistake introverts make is to wake up one day and announce, "Today, I'm going to become an active networker!" That proclamation is, unfortunately, about as likely to succeed as announcing that you're going to lose weight or quit smoking once and for all.

## **2. Don't assume you're being a pest.**

Introverts tend to assume they'll be bothering the people they contact. They may be projecting their own feelings onto others. Introverts often prefer to be left alone--to do their work without interruptions or having their "own little world" invaded. Before you assume you're going to be a pest if you try to make contact with someone, think twice. Most people will be glad to hear from you.

## **3. Rely on your supporters.**

People you know well and who are accessible can provide emotional support when the going gets tough, encouragement on the way up and a kick in the pants when you're slacking off. Networking invariably brings challenges that result in less than positive feelings. Supporters can offer encouragement and empathy along the way.

#### **4. Get the competitive juices flowing.**

Try to remember lots of people, who aren't half as capable, qualified, talented and nice as you are advancing simply because they connect with others and make themselves visible. Even people who aren't competitive by nature usually can muster some competitive drive when they see how unfair it is that less-qualified colleagues are getting ahead.

#### **5. Rest on your laurels.**

Remember the times you've been successful in group endeavors or one-on-one interactions with others. These recollections will give you courage to face the next networking situation.

#### **6. Be a leader.**

An advantage of any type of leadership position is it gives you a built-in excuse for connecting with people. Introverts don't always seek leadership roles because these positions inevitably require such dreaded tasks as committee meetings and team projects. More behind-the-scenes leadership roles such as being a newsletter editor or secretary for a professional organization can play to your strengths without forcing you to be too outgoing or political.

#### **7. Enlist a spokesperson.**

If you're hesitant to contact someone you don't know, consider having another person act as a go-between for you. If someone in your network has given you the name of a colleague, ask your contact to call the person first for you to "warn them" that you'll be calling. Most people are willing to do this.

#### **8. Don't underestimate the power of listening.**

Those who don't have the gift of gab shouldn't despair. Listening is just as important as talking when it comes to establishing good relationships with others. There's nothing extroverts like better than having someone listen to them talk.

#### **9. Don't sweat the small talk.**

Small talk is just what it sounds like: small. A sense of humor or some profound insight is nice, but there's nothing wrong with a mundane comment to break the ice like, "Large turnout, isn't it?" or "This is great dip." Asking a question is often a great way to initiate a conversation.

#### **10. Like birds of a feather, flock together.**

If you find group interaction difficult, look for other people who seem uncomfortable and approach them. It's easier to start with other introverts than with the intimidating woman in red who's surrounded by a phalanx of fans in the center of the room. But don't get stuck with the introverts. At some point you have to leave the nest.

#### **11. Make the most of what you know.**

What you know is just as important as who you know when it comes to networking. Unlike extroverts, introverts are likely to be the ones who take the time to read the industry newsletters cover-to-cover. Let people know you as the person they can call for the latest information on whatever's relevant to your field. Take the initiative to pick up the phone and share your findings with others.

### **12. Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse.**

It's likely you'll find yourself having the same sort of conversations repeatedly. If you tend to get tongue-tied when meeting someone new, try practicing what you're going to say. If you freeze up or babble incoherently when leaving messages, get in the habit of taking time before picking up the phone to plan what you'll say if the person doesn't answer.

### **13. Don't keep it to yourself.**

Introverts worry they'll bother people, so they tend to reach out to others only when they're really worried or excited about something. Instead, try to get in the habit of connecting with people over small things--not just the big ones. Doing so enables you to develop ongoing relationships and ensures that contacts are there for you when you need to share the big stuff.

### **14. Attend events that have a purpose.**

If you're uncomfortable or nervous at events that are solely networking opportunities, try to attend gatherings that have a purpose, such as educational or cultural seminars. Interactive classes and workshops are good bets because they have a built-in agenda that involves structured networking.

### **15. Write often.**

If you can't get yourself to pick up the phone and make a cold call, or even a cool call, then consider writing. A letter of introduction can make the follow-up phone call less nerve-racking.

### **16. Get out among them.**

Do you tend to hole up in your office or other workplace? Just getting out of the house or office to be among people helps. Although walking isn't direct networking, it propels you out of your own little world and brings about a powerful mindset change that can lead you into networking.

### **17. Be positive.**

Before you declare that it's not going to be worth your time to talk to Joe Shmoe or to attend a particular event, stop and think. Do you have rational proof that your prospects are dim or are you just afraid? Almost all encounters are worthwhile, if for no other reason than for the practice.

### **18. Consider seeking professional help.**

If you think your shyness or introversion is more than just a mild nuisance, you might need to consult a psychologist, therapist or other mental health counselor. Shyness that seriously hinders social interactions can keep you from doing what you need to do, and you may benefit from professional treatment.

### **19. Be comfortable in your own skin.**

Sometimes reluctance to network results from insecurity about your appearance. While physical attractiveness is by no means a prerequisite for being a successful networker, the "package" you present to others is important. If something about your outward image is undermining your confidence, consider fixing what's fixable and learn to make the most of what's not.

### **20. Just do it.**

You never know where a job, lead or some good advice is going to turn up. Sure, networking can be difficult, anxiety-provoking and a pain in the neck, but at some point you have to abandon all the excuses, take a deep breath and just do it.

*-- Ms. Tullier is a career counselor based in New York, a member of the faculty of New York University and author of "Networking for Everyone!" (1998, JIST Works Inc.), from which this article is excerpted.*