

Networking Strategies For Shy Professionals

By JUDY ROSEMARIN

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If you're a reserved person, losing a job may feel like your worst nightmare coming true. Like anyone else, you'll likely have financial worries during your transition. But your problems won't stop there. To land a new position quickly, you need to do what every shy person hates most: talk to people you don't know.

Unlike extroverts, you aren't energized by contact with others. Frankly, you prefer being alone. And the idea of getting in touch with complete strangers gives you the chills.

About 25% of us are introverted types who prefer the company of our own ideas and thoughts and who recharge by being alone. But this behavior is the antithesis of what's needed to conduct an effective job search. Surveys indicate that talking to others to gain referrals is how the majority of executives find new positions. Other methods, such as answering newspaper ads and Internet listings or talking to recruiters, are less effective, resulting in about one-third of all new positions.

If you choose to use these more impersonal job-search techniques, you'll no doubt gain an offer eventually, but you'll need to work harder and longer than if you're able to network. A better alternative may be to develop less-threatening networking techniques. Start by understanding the true meaning and process of networking.

Discard Incorrect Notions

Many job seekers incorrectly view the tactic as a frenzied quest to collect as many names as possible, then ask everyone on their list for jobs. No wonder introverts are afraid to network. This definition would exhaust any sane person.

Other job hunters define networking as asking for favors they can't return. "Networking makes me feel like I'm begging for a job," says a former human resources vice president at a New Jersey-based chemicals company.

Both definitions are wrong. Networking shouldn't be frenzied, nor is it about "begging" for a job. In fact, networking isn't really about getting a job. It's about using shared interests to develop and maintain mutually beneficial relationships. Then, if you lose your job, these contacts will be there to help.

Done right, networking is a lifelong, evolutionary process that you should do frequently, if not daily. It's as natural as eating and sleeping. Whenever you talk with others and seek their opinions to make an informed decision -- even if it's just to find a good restaurant, movie or electrician -- you're networking.

Of course, this definition raises red flags for many shy people. But if you understand your personality type and your limitations, you can create a strategy that works for you, says Bill Roth of ACT Associates, a Norwalk, Conn.-based career-management firm.

For instance, some people are more introverted than others, and some introverts are successful in fields that normally attract extroverts. By learning who you are, you'll be more open and approachable, says Mr. Roth.

Learn About Yourself

"You have to understand what it means to be an introvert," he says. "Some introverts are actually great salespeople because all sales aren't the same."

One East Coast sales representative with Baxter International, a maker of medical technology products in Deerfield, Ill., doesn't view herself as a typical salesperson because she's so introverted. Nonetheless, by developing relationships with customers instead of trying to sell them products, she always exceeds her quota.

"They trust me," she says. "I tell them the truth. I take my time, listen to what they want and try to service them."

Typically, introverts are quiet, but they aren't necessarily shy, says Mark Carsman, an introvert who teaches a course called "Networking for Non-Networkers" for New York University's Continuing Education Program.

"They're generally quieter individuals who prefer to spend as much time as possible in the company of their own thoughts and ideas, even when among people," he says. "They need not be shy and they care an awful lot about people."

Become a Good Listener

This caring attitude gives introverts an advantage over more chatty networkers, since they're usually good listeners who absorb and reflect on what they hear. This ability to remember what others say and value is critical to fostering good relationships.

One quiet but successful account representative who travels widely for an insurance software-design company uses a medium that works best for her -- writing letters -- to stay in touch with her network.

"I've always kept in sporadic contact with people," she says. "Since I've traveled all over the world, my contacts have mostly been by letter, which I think is effective. I keep it up with a little note or clipping or something else just to stay in contact."

The account rep says she's accepted her personality type and doesn't try to be extroverted. "I've been perceived as aloof, so I've learned to speak up a bit more to allow people to get to know me better," she says. "But people don't see me jabbering away."

Connect to Your Passion

Many introverts panic and become immobilized by the prospect of calling strangers. But by focusing on an aspect of their industry or field, or on a special career interest they're passionate about, they can overcome this terror.

What's your passion? What field, industry, product, service or cause excites you? What do you enjoy about researching and studying? What current events always capture your attention? What new products or developments fascinate you? When you hook into these interests, you'll talk with conviction and insight, which can reduce your networking jitters.

"Pick something that means a lot to you and approach people on that basis," says Dr. Carsman. "You need to have a focus and genuine reason for speaking to people."

The insurance software account rep agrees. "I'm more of an observer and like to see what's going on, but if I feel strongly about something, I'll express it," she says.

Volunteer to Help Others

Volunteering with professional, community and other groups is another good way for shy candidates to gain visibility and develop relationships. Whenever possible, accept volunteer jobs that allow you to show off your skills. For instance, if you're a financial whiz, become the treasurer of an organization you care about.

By serving as an unpaid volunteer, you'll be noticed in new ways without having to change your introverted style and personality. The same is true if you take on paid, temporary roles. For instance, a former finance vice president for an aerospace company who was too introverted to network accepted a temporary job driving executives to local airports.

During the trips, he talked with passengers about the shrinking defense industry and employment options in other fields. The conversations were easy for him because they were one-on-one in a relaxed, no-pressure setting. After three months of driving, he met an executive with a suburban New York engineering firm. The executive offered him a job as finance manager and is now his new boss.

Use Good Body Language

Besides viewing networking differently, introverts can enhance their effectiveness by improving how they come across to others. Again, you don't have to make a sudden personality change. However, by altering negative perceptions about yourself, you'll build greater trust and rapport with others.

Begin by learning to maintain good eye contact. Introverts often avoid looking directly at others, which makes them seem remote or disinterested, says Dr. Carsman, a career-management counselor. Co-workers often find this behavior "maddening, suspicious and hard to get a handle on," he says.

But if you never look directly at others, changing this habit can be difficult. The first step is deciding to change. Start by looking at a spot just above and between the other person's

eyes. This may seem awkward, but it works. The other person doesn't know you're looking there instead of in their eyes, and you won't seem to glare or stare.

You may want to change other behaviors, but don't do anything that seems artificial or contrived. "You must know who you are and be honest with people," says Dr. Carsman. "Small talk doesn't fit well for introverts."

When an introverted mortgage officer who feared networking asked if he should act more outgoing, Dr. Carsman told him not to do it. "I said he should do nothing that was contrary to his nature and to tell people that he was looking for an organization that could really use his skills," Dr. Carsman says. "He never changed his manner. He was still quiet and undynamic, but [he] was earnest, solid and sincere. He was embraced everywhere he went."

Five Easy Steps

Networking doesn't mean making thousands of contacts. Instead, write provocative letters introducing yourself, then arrange ways to discuss mutually interesting subjects with a few key people. If you view your job search as a personal research project on a compelling subject -- your own future -- you'll find it easier to collect critical information and ideas.

The following steps can help reserved professionals become more effective networkers:

1. *Recognize and deal with the aspects of networking that bother you most.* For example, if you're scared of meeting people, begin by practicing with trusted friends. Tell them about your interests, training and abilities. Or, if you're worried about becoming tongue-tied, role-play your meetings until you feel confident about what to say.
2. *Create a structured plan, then stick to it.* Set goals and be disciplined about achieving them. While some career counselors recommend making 15 to 20 calls a day, lower this amount if it seems overwhelming.
3. *Make calls when your energy is highest.* If you know that you're more upbeat after lunch, save phone calls until then and use the morning for administrative tasks.
4. *Know what you want to say when calling.* Develop a script that includes your key points and use it to make sure you mention important items. Many introverts have difficulty making small talk. By learning about your contacts and their companies, you can direct your conversations and make them more meaningful.
5. *Take time out to replenish yourself.* Plan your schedule so that you have periods of solitude that allow you to recharge. For instance, don't schedule a full day's activities if you plan to network at an evening event.

While you don't have to change yourself, you'll need to learn extroverted skills and behaviors to become a more effective job hunter. Like an acquired taste, your

appreciation for networking may grow. And when you start receiving the benefits, your appetite for it may even increase.

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