

INTRODUCTION

Finding a job is hard. On average it takes 10–20 calls to set up an interview and 7–10 interviews to get a job. Networking is a way to speed up the process. But while research has shown that networking is the best strategy, many people with disabilities never use this tool. This article will teach you how to use networking to improve your job search.

So, what is networking? **Networking means talking with many people to learn about job openings faster.** It means telling people about the kind of work you want to do, and about the past experiences you have had. It also means asking people about their work, and asking for the names of other people who might be willing to talk to you. This process lets you gather information about the career you're interested in. It also can help you learn what jobs are out there, and meet people who may be able to offer you a job.

A study done by the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) showed that networking helped people with disabilities to find jobs. Here are three ways networking was helpful:

1. **People got jobs with better pay.**
2. **People got jobs with more hours.**
3. **The job search took less time.**

Networking really is okay!

Many people feel uncomfortable about networking. Perhaps they think they won't know how to talk with strangers. They may worry that people will not have the time to talk to them.

Being a bit anxious as you start out networking is natural. But here are three important facts that will help you:

1. Networking is part of a typical job-search process. Almost every successful job seeker—with or without disabilities—does it.
2. You have a right to ask for help.
3. People like to help.

People will not be surprised when you ask them for help with your job search. After all, they have probably done the same thing, and everyone needs help at some time. Also, most people feel good about being able to offer assistance to others. Most of the time, if people are able to help, they will.

How do you network?

The saying, "It's not what you know, it's who you know," is very true. Every single person you know may be able to help with your job hunt. When you are choosing people to talk to, include everyone you can think of—not just people who can hire you.

Start by making a list of everyone you know, including family, friends, neighbors, counselors, teachers, coworkers, and employers. Your list should include everyone you know well enough to have a conversation with. These people are probably going to be willing to give you suggestions for your job search. This first group of people may simply introduce you to others, or they may offer specific help.

Using your network

So now you've identified your network: those people on your list. These are also called your contacts. The next step is to let them all know that you are doing a job search, and to tell them the type of job you are seeking. These people may be able to give you useful information. They may also introduce you to other contacts, and even to employers.

From all these contacts and connections, you can find out about:

- ▶ Current and future job openings
- ▶ Inside information about your chosen career, industry, or company
- ▶ Who in a company is best to talk to
- ▶ Other people who are doing a job that you would like to do
- ▶ Which companies or departments are expanding or laying off
- ▶ People who are experts in the type of work you want to do
- ▶ Other types of businesses that could use your skills

You will not know how useful or willing any of your contacts are until you ask them. But what do you say, and how do you ask for help?

REMEMBER: *Not all of your contacts will be able to help you in your job search. Some people will provide great suggestions. Others may not have as many ideas to share. If someone can't help you, just thank them for their time and move on.*

What do I say and do?

- ▶ Tell people that you are looking for a job, and describe the type of work you are interested in.
- ▶ Ask them if they know anyone who does this kind of work. If so, see if they will introduce you so that you can have an informational interview. (See the next page for more details about informational interviews.)
- ▶ Show them your resume and tell them about your skills and your interests. Ask if they have ideas for your job hunt.
- ▶ Give your resume out to everyone. Having people read your resume is helpful because they get to know you better. Ask people to pass it along to others too.
- ▶ Ask, "Can you give me the phone number of someone else I should talk to?" If they say yes, that other person can become a new contact.

NOTE: *It is important to let everyone know that you are looking for a job, but don't ask contacts if they can hire you or if they know someone who can hire you. This question ends conversations quickly! If they have leads they will tell you about them.*

Calling a new contact:

- ▶ You can start by saying something like, "Hi, my name is Julia Smith and I got your number from Jim Chang. He said you might have some ideas about my job search. Is this a good time to talk?"
- ▶ If it is not a good time to talk, ask when a good time would be. You are responsible for calling back.
- ▶ Offer to email or fax your resume, and ask what would be most convenient for the new contact.
- ▶ Ask for suggestions about your job search and names of other people who can assist you.
- ▶ Ask if you may keep in touch to let the new contact know how your search is going.
- ▶ Thank him or her for making the time to talk to you.

Informational interviews

Informational interviewing means talking with someone about their career. The goal is to learn about a type of job or a certain company, not to get a job offer. This kind of interview can happen in person or over the phone. Usually you'll be talking to people you don't know very well. That's great—they are valuable new contacts for you!

Useful questions for you to ask:

- ▶ How did you get started at this company or in this job?
- ▶ What is the typical work day like?
- ▶ What is your favorite thing about your job? What don't you like?
- ▶ What advice would you have for someone like me, who is starting out in this career?
- ▶ Who would you recommend that I speak with to learn more about the company?

Benefits:

- ▶ less stressful than job interviews
- ▶ good practice for job interviews
- ▶ give you a head start on the competition
- ▶ help you find out about what a company or career might really be like
- ▶ face-to-face contact with people who do a job you're interested in
- ▶ good source to learn about other people to talk to

To set up an informational interview, list people or businesses you would like to talk with. Next, ask your network to connect you with those people or companies. Or you can just call a company and ask if you can set up a short, 20-minute informational interview. Explain that you are doing a job search and would like to learn about the company.

If you are anxious about this process, ask for help from your support system. They can practice the call with you, or someone can go with you to the interview.

Maintain a positive relationship with people in your network

Networking means that you will meet and talk with many people. It is important to maintain a good relationship with them. Follow-up is part of that process, and one way to do so is to send a thank-you card or email immediately after you meet with a person. Whether you send a card or email isn't important, but it is important to send something!

Following up doesn't end with the thank-you note. You can ask people if it's okay for you to call or email them once a month to let them know how your job hunt is going. Most people will say yes. Only keep in touch with contacts who say it is okay to do so.

The idea of following up isn't to ask for a job. The idea is to stay in touch and to keep your contacts aware of you. Be sure to keep follow-up phone calls short and to make sure it's a good time to talk.

Some Tips

- ▶ Keep track of your networking. It helps you see how much you've accomplished, as well as what you still need to do.
- ▶ Make a list of all your contacts, especially people who were helpful.
- ▶ Remind people that you are looking for a job.
- ▶ Make a contact follow-up plan, and follow up on leads that you may have overlooked.
- ▶ Be sure to keep in touch with your new contacts.
- ▶ Rework your resume after three months if you get no interviews.
- ▶ Get support from other job seekers to keep your energy up.
- ▶ Improve your writing and computer skills.
- ▶ Talk about yourself in a positive way. Include your skills, interests, and hobbies in discussions about your job hunt.
- ▶ Try to keep a positive outlook—other people will notice, and it will pay off for you in the long run.

Self-advocacy

Being a self-advocate means speaking up for yourself and being assertive. Here are tips on how to do this when working with professionals such as job developers:

Be an active participant.

Give lots of input to your job developer.

Ask for what you want.

If you have a clear idea of what you want, make sure you say it.

Tell different people about your goals.

Everyone involved should know what you want (job developer, case managers, friends, family, etc.).

Ask more than once.

Don't be afraid to say what you want several times, especially if nothing is happening.

Ask why.

If something is unclear or doesn't seem right, ask for an explanation.

Don't just accept the way things are.

Patience is good, but it is fair to want to get help. If you feel your job developer is not willing to work with you, you have the right to question why.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects people with disabilities and ensures that they will be treated fairly. **Become familiar with your rights. Go to www.ada.gov to learn more.**

Conclusion

The time and energy you invest in your job search will pay off. Try to remain hopeful and believe that your efforts will lead you to a good job.

When you find a job, **and you will find a job**, don't forget to contact the people who helped you with your search. They will want to hear your good news. As a way of saying "thank you," remind these people that you are available to offer assistance to them if they need it.

Keep in mind how it felt to do a job search and to reach out to people. Remember what it was like to ask people in your network to give you assistance. They were there for you, and now it is up to you to return the favor to someone else. You can be helpful to others going through a job search. They will be grateful to you, just as you were to those who helped you.



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