

In these times of economic volatility, one thing is for certain. You need to be positive, proactive and focus on what you can control in the workplace. No matter what your circumstances, it's important to do all you can do to increase your employability.

As the work environment becomes increasingly competitive, it is more important than ever to build and maintain relationships. One very effective way to do this is to develop and hone your networking skills. You may have heard the expression "it's not what you know, it's who you know." Author Susan Roane would suggest that the key here is **who** knows **you**. Networking may come more easily to some versus others. This article will provide some practical tips that anyone can (and should) use to enhance their professional connections.

Let's start with a definition. Networking is the ability to develop a unique collection of relationships for the purpose of mutually exchanging information or services. The first step of an effective process is to create a Personal Networking Statement. Like a 30 second elevator speech, this exercise allows you to gain clarity on your personal competitive advantage as well as what you can offer the other person. By creating a Personal Networking Statement, you can also focus on what you'd like to get out of the conversation, enhancing your productivity and making best use of your time.

Attached is a template for a Personal Networking Statement.

Once you've completed your statement, you are ready to get started. Many people are hesitant to initiate conversations, assuming that they will need to use this time to ask for a job, a favor etc. I'm recommending a different approach. Here are a few thoughts to reframe the conversation.

- **Focus on what you can do for the other person.** Use the principles of Business Karma: what goes around, comes around. It makes it easier to begin the conversation if you take the emphasis off of yourself. What can you offer? How can you provide value? Do you have relevant information that could benefit the individual? Do you have a specific contact that you'd like to introduce to the person? By concentrating on how you can help others, you'll alleviate any anxiety that may come from contacting others for your own benefit.
- **Be open to networking at unexpected times and places.** Every occasion is a potential opportunity. No longer limited to the golf course, networking now takes place in such unlikely venues as spas, fitness centers, children's sporting events, and school programs. I met a contact while we were both getting pedicures. By opening up the conversation to our professional fields, we discovered many commonalities that eventually turned into mutually beneficial business

opportunities. I also met future clients at my son's basketball games, by talking to neighbors while walking our dogs, etc. The possibilities are endless.

- **Block out time to network on your calendar.** Treat this time as an investment in yourself. Commit to those meetings just like you would a meeting with your boss. If you are self employed or between jobs, schedule times to network on a regular basis. For some people a monthly lunch will be sufficient whereas others may prefer weekly coffee outings. Challenge yourself to make the calls and get out there. Whatever your comfort level is, go beyond it. By stretching yourself, you'll continue to build your pool of contacts. When attending events, conferences or professional association meetings, introduce yourself to someone new. Get involved by joining a committee or taskforce. As the old saying goes, you get out of a situation what you put into it.
- **Take advantage of social networking sites.** I don't claim to be an expert in this area but I do know that there is a plethora of opportunities out there. Join a professional organization like LinkedIn or a social one like Facebook (or both). Connect with people from your past such as former colleagues, classmates, friends and neighbors. Take a class in how to make the most of these sites to leverage visibility. This may be especially appealing to those who are more introverted and would rather network from the comfort of their own computer.

A little planning can also go a long way when it comes to preparing for your networking meeting. You may want to follow this process to ensure maximum results.

- 1). Develop a list of contacts and block out time for meetings
- 2). Prepare: Identify the purpose & content for each meeting
 - Develop questions & desired outcomes in advance
- 3). Confirm the meeting time & place
- 4). Meet with contact
 - State your purpose: what you can offer and what you hope to achieve
 - Ask questions. Listen for new ideas.
 - Ask for recommendations for other networking contacts
- 5).. Send a thank you.
 - Depending on the level of formality desired, this can be via email or a hand written note.
- 6). Record notes & actions to be taken
- 7). Follow through. Follow through. Follow through. Keep commitments you made to yourself & others