







What the Chinese can teach us about networking

The Chinese have been perfecting guanxi which is the equivalent of our networking and relationship building for thousands of years. Guanxi provides a means for individuals to group together to help each other do things like build wealth, share resources, gain favors and to receive protections not available to individuals alone. It is thought to have evolved in response to an oppressive government and continues to be a main facet of modern Chinese culture. They rely on guanxi more than government to get things done. Indeed, business people traveling to China are well advised to become familiar with guanxi before trying to build partnerships.

Networking here in the West is a relatively recent event and is more transaction based as opposed to trust based. But there are some basic lessons to be learned about interpersonal dynamics that can be applied to a job search.

-  Relationships are built over time. It may even take many years. But once the network is in place, things can happen very quickly with less red tape, restrictions and risk. They tend get to know each other personally well in advance of any life or business transaction. Guanxi is a lifelong pursuit and the network runs deeper.
-  Reciprocation is the currency of the network. If I do you a favor, I expect one in return – at least at some point. If you fail to return the favor when asked, your value could be diminished beyond repair. Conversely, the added effort you make on behalf of a contact will be recognized and rewarded. Either way, word travels fast.
-  Family, honor and reputation. Family is the foundation of Chinese society and each family member is motivated to bring honor to the family. Family members are expected to participate in the family business too. Personal reputation is directly impacted by the reputation of the family, and parents directly influence careers. In the Western sense, family support and influence lessens at maturity, so more emphasis is placed on friends and making connections with strangers. The tactic becomes finding some common ground with someone you otherwise have no relation with.
-  Feelings are more important. Western business people typically don't spend nearly as much time considering other's feelings. For example, "saving face" is all about respecting and promoting another's feeling of self esteem and value. People in general (especially hiring managers) appreciate that someone is sensitive to the feelings of others, somewhat like our concept of being a "team player".
-  Personal contact is more important. Face-to-face or phone contact is vastly preferred to email or other means of communicating. Lunch or dinner is the preferred venue for a business meeting. Like an interview, the personal meeting is the most important because of the immediate communication. Job seekers need to go out of their way to meet and talk with people and not just use email or the internet.
-  Decisions are based on personal recommendations. This is one area which is very similar to us in the West but definitely worthy of mention. Hiring managers love personal recommendations because they remove a significant amount of risk from the decision. A highly placed personal recommendation trumps everything in most cases. Building a group of admirers who will vouch for you is critical.

Guanxi may explain why social media has become so incredibly popular in China. It opens up networking potential far beyond traditional methods. The same 5,000 year old networking lessons still apply today but social media technology helps people network so much more efficiently.