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CASTING A WIDE NET

Effective networking in today's economy.

Whether you are searching for your dream job, aiming for a promotion or simply angling to become closer with industry leaders, networking is often the solution. Effective networking can be a powerful tool in advancing one's personal and professional goals but it takes skill, patience and tact.

Now more than ever, a job seeker's networking plan must be strategic and focused. As recently as October 2012, employment analysis experts reported 2.5 unemployed workers for every job vacancy.

"The economy has altered the job search atmosphere," said Kelly Robinson Jensen, vice president of operations at Xelerate LLC, a recruitment process outsourcing company in Philadelphia. "You need to set yourself apart and be able to communicate why you are the right person for the job. This means you may have to do some self-awareness activities before you begin the networking process."

GETTING STARTED

Have a clear sense of what type of position you are looking for and what makes you qualified before reaching out to contacts.

Jensen believes people generally enjoy helping others and like to talk about their own achievements. Job seekers should identify people to network with and then be prepared to sit back and listen before asking for assistance.

"I tell my candidates to take advantage of every single person they run into and to be prepared. If a job seeker is walking his dog and runs into a neighbor who asks how he is doing, the job seeker needs to use that time to his advantage," explained Katherine Captain, a recruiter with Tetra Pak, a global company that specializes in food processing and packaging solutions.

Captain believes job seekers should have an "elevator pitch" prepared for just this type of scenario. She defines an elevator pitch as a short summary of the person's ideal job. "To the neighbor, you could say 'I'm doing really well. I'm in transition, and looking for a job as a nurse educator in a clinical setting,' rather than the typical response of 'I'm fine.'"

The pitch should be prepared and practiced for just this type of conversation so the job seeker sounds confident and well informed of the specific industry. And, Captain advises hiring managers to do the same: tell everyone what type of candidate you are looking for.

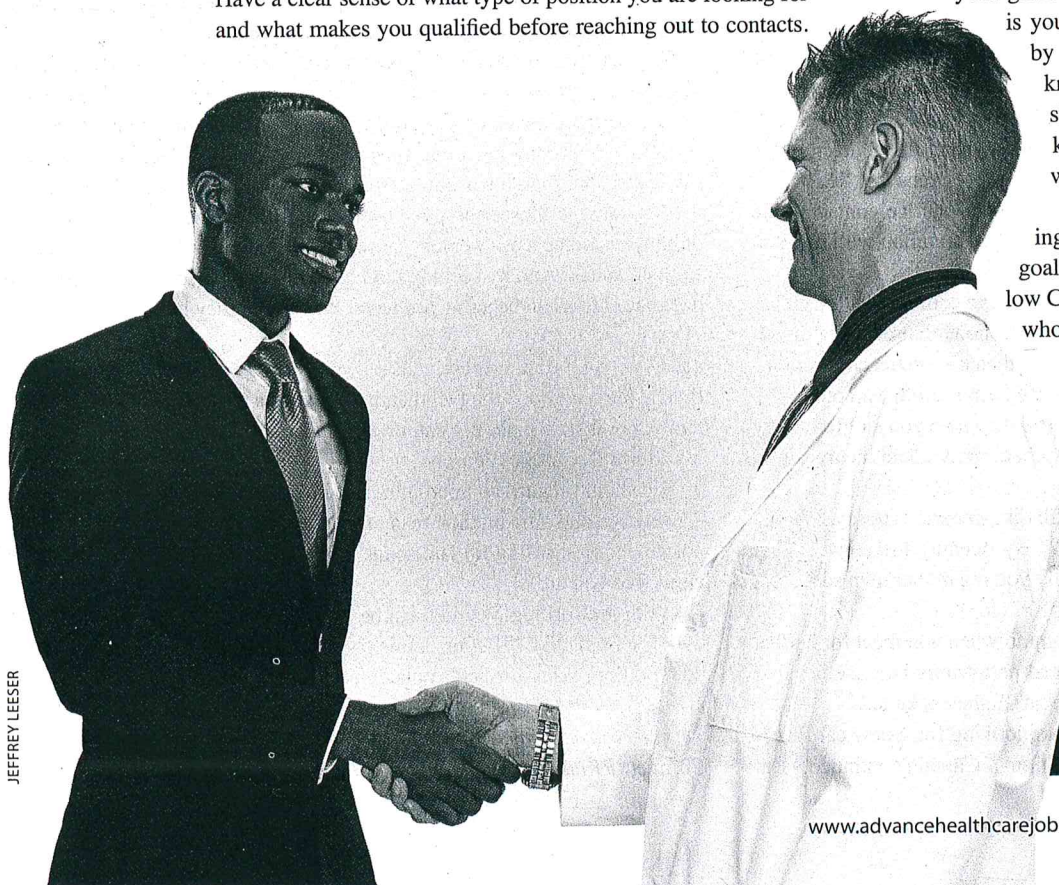
"It is good practice to know you can easily communicate your goals to someone else, even if that someone is your neighbor," Captain shared. "And then by effect you're deploying everyone you know as personal networkers for you. Besides, you never know who your neighbor knows. His wife's college roommate may work at the facility you're interested in."

Jensen explains that, just as you are looking for the right job situation, the recruiter's goal is to find the right candidate. And to follow Captain's line of thinking, you never know who recruiters are networking with.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Jensen suggests job seekers tap into all resources available to them and to always follow through on an

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application. "Job applicants often tell me, 'When I send my résumé in or apply to a job posting, I never hear back,'" she shared. "That's the first mistake — thinking that hitting 'send résumé' is all the action needed."

The solution? Job seekers need to make connections that can help get that résumé in the right hands, Jensen explained. It's just as important for job seekers to network without seeming pushy as it is to identify the right people in their network to talk to.

One of Jensen's major clients is Main Line Health (MLH), a network of hospitals and health centers in the Philadelphia area. According to Jensen, MLH has received 10,000-15,000 job applications over the past few years — for a few hundred openings — and most of those applicants do not have relative experience or have not made a direct connection.

"Many people feel their résumés are just sitting in databases," Captain said. "And they probably are. People need to establish a relationship with the right contact. And that relationship is the jet fuel that gets the résumé in the door."

The scenario is a catch-22: You can't get an interview without a résumé and your résumé is useless unless it falls in the right hands. Recruiters, therefore, advise job seekers to be persistent in finding the right individual to receive their résumés. And that person is typically found through networking, whether in person or via social media. LinkedIn, for example, is a popular professional social networking website that continues to gain traction.

EFFECTIVE NETWORKING

"These days, you have to do more than just send a résumé," Jensen told *ADVANCE*. "You need to network and get the right person on the phone to follow up on your application. And the best way to do that is through LinkedIn — it's better, faster and easier than digging for a contact on the company's website."

"I suggest searching for a human resources or executive contact at the company you're interested in, finding something in common with him and then making a connection," she continued.

Another route is to see if you have connections in common with the contact. "Next, call or ping for help to get an introduction," Jensen said. "If you can use someone else's name or a commonality, then it's a better connection."

According to Captain, you can also use LinkedIn to have a connection introduce you to someone in her network who may help you. "Offer to buy that person a cup of coffee so you two may chat briefly about the transition you are in right now," she said.

Captain believes the best way to approach this scenario is to say, "Would you be willing to provide your expertise?" By opening the conversation this way, you are acknowledging how highly you regard her own successes and achievements.

It's imperative you have the specifics in mind when you meet for coffee, according to Captain. "The person will need parameters because her first reaction will be, 'Can I really help this person?'" she explained.

"Networking can work well when you are looking for a new career using skills you have gathered from other positions," Captain continued. "But

make sure to look for people who will give honest feedback on what gaps you might have in your skillset."

According to Captain, networking can help you answer questions such as: Are my skills appropriate? What am I missing? Do I need to pursue a certificate or more schooling?

"Just make sure you are prepared to learn that you may need to go fill in the blanks," she said. "And that process may take a year or a few years."

BEYOND LINKEDIN

LinkedIn has evolved as a great resource/tool for job seekers but it's not the only one to use as a follow up to job search websites. Another up-and-coming resource is Meetup.com, according to Captain. Meetup is an online community of groups that meet in person to discuss or participate in activities they share an interest in. Meetup activities can range from a Java user group to a book club or writer's workshop.

"I recommend everyone spend some time on there and set up a profile," Captain stated. "Get to know it and what is going on in your community. Even if you can't attend an event, you may be able to make relationships by simply being active on the site."

Another resource that doesn't take a lot of time and should be easy to figure out if it's fruitful is using your school's career center. "Although probably best suited for recent grads, this could be a secret source for employees who are transitioning," Captain shared. "Get in touch with your college or university and tell them what you are looking for."

Surrounding yourself with positive people and activities during a job search is of utmost importance. If you have recently lost a job, Captain recommends being aware of how much time you're spending with others who are laid off. "It may be comforting and may make you feel better to commiserate in the short term, but the support can become a crutch," she shared.

"I encourage those who have been laid off to connect with at least two employed contacts per week because the positive interaction is important," Captain added. And by seeking out new contacts, job seekers should leave no stones unturned because you never know who they know.

NETWORKING ETIQUETTE

People may overlook the fact that there is such a thing as networking incorrectly. For instance, do not call or email a contact too many times because it's a turnoff, cautions Jensen.

You should regard an appointment with a contact as important as an interview and show up on time ready to gather ideas. Missing this type of appointment or showing up late sends a strong message about what type of employee you are.

"With networking, you need to be careful and respectful of the person's time," Jensen said. "If someone is trying to help you, be mindful that the time you're asking for lands outside of normal job duties."

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