

# Use friendly discussions to advance your career

By Brenda Koritko

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Think about all the different people that you chat with on a regular basis. This group most likely includes family, friends, classmates, neighbors, and co-workers. Then, think about the people that you have pleasant, often personal, discussions with from time to time. This group might include your hair stylist, parents at the local baseball field, merchants in your community, or people in your religious community. Next, review any lists or rosters you have for professional organizations, social clubs, or athletic clubs. These lists will help you remember folks you meet occasionally.

Just by completing these simple tasks, you have completed the first step of effective networking. You have identified your existing network, and you are ready to begin organizing your networking strategy using the information you have gathered to create a dynamic contact list. You know people that know people. It is easy to expand your network quickly once you identify your core group of great connections.

Don't focus on where the people you have identified work. When you have finished listing all the people in your existing network, rank these people by how comfortable you feel with them. Plan to build your confidence by contacting the people at the top of your list first.

Keep a handwritten record, or enter your information in a database. Make this decision based on what is the most convenient way to make sure that you have easy access your information. Include some, or all, of the following information in your record: referral source; contact and organization name; the date of your meeting; key information gathered; follow-up action/s, and the date you sent a thank you letter.

Family and friends are a valuable resource. Plan to ask the people you know for advice, opinions, information, help, ideas, research, or suggestions. How many times have you shared information with the people on your contact list? How many times have they spoken to you about their families, mutual friends, or the challenging and exciting events that they are experiencing in their workplace? I am guessing the number is beyond measure, and that you have access to an endless number of rewarding opportunities to explore.

It's okay to use these opportunities to advance your career. Asking family, friends, and acquaintances for help will not get in the way of your friendships. Actually, it's the opposite. You may be surprised at how many people are more than willing to provide valuable contact information and talk about their jobs or industry. Think about how happy you would be to offer information that could help any one of the people on your contact list.

One of the most important advantages of using your personal network to explore rewarding opportunities is that you will have the name of a mutual acquaintance to use when you contact potential employers. For example, "Jane Doe suggested that I contact you as someone who would be a good person to give me some career advice." Then, when you connect with this person, you also introduce the potential for connecting with their contacts and the opportunity to use their name in the next introduction, and so on. The power of networking is that people you may never meet may help you advance your career.

Find a networking style that you are comfortable with, and take some time to prepare a few different introductions. Think about what you have to offer that would interest the person you are contacting. For example if you are contacting a friend's friend at your local Chamber of Commerce, highlight your corporate experience, "Hi, my name is Jack Doe. I am a project manager working on the ABC project for our municipal government. Prior to this project, I have had great success completing projects for both EFG Corporation and HIJ organization."

Networking involves establishing and nurturing relationships, sharing information, and having discussions with interesting people, including career related discussions with friends or family. You are prepared! It may seem too simple, but when you are prepared to ask the people you know to help in your job search, you increase the likelihood of discovering rewarding opportunities.

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