

*Beyond Altruism*

# Networking Quid Pro Quo

## How being a 'networkee' can boost your career

BY SHERYL SPANIER

You're working late on a project. The phone rings. You pick it up, expecting the final set of numbers you need from your chief collaborator. Instead, you hear:

"Hello, my name is Dianne Sampson, and I was referred to you by our mutual friend Doug Swift. Doug knows I'm seeking a new position in the accounting field and thought you would. . . ."

Wonderful, you groan. Your impulse is to cut the caller off mid-sentence and tell her that (A) you're too busy to talk, (B) you don't know of any current openings, and (C) why doesn't she send her resume to personnel like everyone else?

**STOP!**

Before you're caught in such a situation, take a few minutes to think through the alternatives. Networking is a vital career activity, but like most other aspects of life, you have to give to receive. Helping others is a crucial part of the quid pro quo that makes networking work.

### A Two-Way Street

To date, you may have never needed another's help. Perhaps you haven't been called upon to assist a friend, colleague or contact in a job search. If not, you can't possibly realize the benefits of the experience.

Spending time with someone who needs to expand his network or gather information for career advancement isn't just helpful to him; it can move your career along as well. Being receptive to networkers is a great way to build your own contact base. Networkers can provide you with vital resources and information, and even give you a personal boost.

Maryanne Ruggiero, a vice president of human resources at Citibank in New York City, emphasizes the importance of networking when you're not in a job-change mode. "Keeping active and getting to know people in your field are important career management tools. Sharing trends and methods of conducting business in your industry and in other industries keeps you fresh and creative," she says.

Networkers are an excellent source of names and data. You can learn a great deal from them about interesting projects, trends and issues in your profession. And when a networker tells you about her work experiences, you may even discover better ways of doing your own job.

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"As a professional, it's important to read the tea leaves and subtle signals of change in your field," says Alan Pickman, a psychologist and outplacement specialist at a major New York City bank. "First-hand observations passed on to you by contacts give you information that people would normally kill for. Meeting with job hunters, information seekers, competitors and colleagues on a regular basis gives you a resource for current industry data, innovations and future needs. This is invaluable to your own career development."

Serving as a contact also can be personally rewarding. Mr. Pickman notes the ego-building nature of networking: "By serving as a mentor and advisor, you get important feedback about your own effectiveness that you rarely get in your daily work. Here is someone saying 'I value what you know.'"

In addition to providing professional informa-

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tion, networkers can help you look good by making it easier to identify talented potential employees.

"Most of the time when people contact me, I don't have an immediate opening," says Ms. Ruggiero. "However, if I'm impressed by the person, I will pass him along to someone I think of who could use his talents. This always results in appreciation by the networker and the recipient." She also keeps a file of those who have networked with her. "Invariably, when I'm doing a search, I can count upon people I've met either to be interested or to refer me to a good candidate," she adds.

Willingness to meet with networkers is only half the battle, of course. Setting time aside to actually do it can be a formidable challenge.

Sensitivity is the key. Your immediate reaction to a networker's call might be akin to the one outlined above—namely, to put off the meeting for as long as possible. After all, you're not a career counselor; you've got a job to do.

Remind yourself of the caller's situation, however. "A job seeker's sense of timing isn't the same

as a worker's," says Freddie Gamble, personnel director for Conde Nast Publications. "To them, every minute is an eternity. In the intensity of their experience, they forget the feeling of being inundated by work schedules and deadlines. Meeting you becomes a major focus—as if their future depends on it."

Moreover, many networkers are plagued by feelings of rejection. Keep this in mind when responding to their requests. If you can't schedule a meeting soon, explain the demands of your current situation. If you truly don't have time for such meetings, says Mr. Pittman, perhaps your own career needs examining.

### Managing the Meeting

Believe it or not, some networkers actually think that upon meeting you, a job magically will emerge from the "hidden job market" which they access merely by coming to your office and asking some canned questions. These naive souls suffer from inadequate preparation and an unfocused purpose. Your session with them can be deadly if you don't take charge.

No one likes to be scammed. Unfortunately, many networkers play this trick. They fantasize that, after one supposed "information" meeting, their contact will either have or know of a position for them.

This kind of pressure destroys the atmosphere of a contact or focus meeting. If your networker isn't savvy enough to know better, educate him. Ask in the beginning of the meeting why he is there and what he hopes to gain from your time together. If he doesn't structure the meeting, suggest that he think about some ideas or goals and offer to meet again.

Most likely, the networker will have an agenda. She may want you to evaluate her goals and background, and to pass her on to others for "information and advice." Your natural impulse is to tell her that you think she has a long and fruitful career ahead of her—or to throw out a couple of names of people just to get her out of your office.

This would be a disservice to the networker and to yourself. Networkers need information about their industry, increased visibility, a reality test of their marketability or a sense of how transferable their skills are. Respond to their requests for explicit information; give advice honestly. Encourage your networker to outline companies of interest and people she wants to meet. Assess her readiness to meet with your contacts. You might injure your reputation with colleagues by allowing an unfocused and

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unprepared networker to contact them with your name as reference.

Choose referrals carefully with a sense of connection or commonality in mind. You needn't limit yourself to those who might know of openings. Consider whether the referral will be able to add to the information, advice or visibility the networker seeks.

You can grease the skids by giving the networker some information about the people to whom you refer her. Perhaps you could offer to call or write ahead to prepare your contacts. (Remember how you felt when you were interrupted by that phone call out of the blue.)

The most important contribution you can make to the person contacting you is to help him feel

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## **If you truly don't have time to meet with would-be networkers, perhaps your career needs examining**

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connected and confident. An extended job search can cause networkers to question their talents and alternatives. Be creative and positive in brainstorming. You'll enjoy this activity and you might help the job seeker to think of new avenues to explore.

Remember (and help the networker to remember) the importance of establishing a relationship as part of the process. You might find areas of commonality that could lead you to a friendship—or to the solution to one of your problems. One networker reported that at a recent contact meeting, she and another professional began to discuss child care options. Both women found that since their children were similar ages, they could combine forces in emergencies. In another situation, two men discovered that they had gone to the same high school. They ended up planning a reunion, thereby increasing their enjoyment—and their contacts. ●

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