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Maximize Your Next Networking Event

BY MATT TARPEY CAREERBUILDER

f there is one skill that can improve any job seeker's employment prospects, it's networking. By knowing how to connect with others, especially with people in similar lines of work, you can open countless doors to some exciting opportunities. With so much of modern life taking place in the digital world, some job seekers may be nervous or unsure about how to best handle a networking event in the physical world. Here is advice on how to maximize your next face-to-face event.

ASK NOT

Going into a networking event with the correct mindset is crucial. Remember that networking, like all communication, should be a two-way street.

Well-prepared job seekers set personal goals for the event, but a wise job seeker also looks for ways to help other attendees achieve their goals, too. "The No. 1 tip I give to job seekers who are intent on using networking events as platforms to find jobs is to refrain from being selfish," says Tom Hart, COO of the Eliassen Group, a technology staffing and consulting firm. "You can't make the exchange solely about you. It has to be about what you can do for the person you are interacting with at the event."

KNOW WHEN TO LISTEN

Job seekers are often well prepared to talk about themselves before going to a networking event. But all that focus on sending the correct messages often leaves them unprepared for the other half of networking — receiving messages.

"To know when and how to pitch oneself into a conversation at a live networking event is the biggest challenge of job seekers," says Desiree Jaeger-Fine, founder of Jaeger-Fine Consulting. "The second challenge is to understand when one has to



stop pitching and start listening. Too many make the mistake of attempting to control the conversation with constant chatter. When they finally do listen, they fail to engage in the kind of focused listening that is essential to effective networking."

Not only do active listeners gain more information more quickly, they have more engaging conversations, leaving the prospective employer with a better impression.

NETWORK HORIZONTALLY

It's not uncommon for job seekers to have trouble initiating contact with employers or letting their nerves get the better of them during conversations. Luckily, employers aren't the only other people at networking events.

"I tell the job seekers at my job fairs not to forget about networking with other job seekers," says Julie Austin, blogger for Fun Job Fairs. "If you know about a job that someone else could apply for that you aren't right for, let people know. It will come back to you, and people will remember that it was you who helped them."

FOLLOW UP

Another key to maximizing your experience at a networking event actually comes after the event is over. Networking is about relationships, and relationships take more than a single introduction in a hotel conference room.

"Within a week of the networking event, follow up with the connections you made. Send a short email indicating that you enjoyed your conversation and would love to continue the discussion over coffee or lunch," suggests Kelly Donovan, career communications strategist with Kelly Donovan & Associates.

"However, don't be pushy or ask about job openings at this point. Focus on building a relationship, and once you have a relationship, your contact will try to help you with your job search," Donovan added.

Building relationships takes time and effort. Capitalizing on a networking event depends on your ability and willingness to continue fostering new professional relationships beyond the event itself.