

# Networking Strategies for the Socially Challenged

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*Many individuals with Asperger's Syndrome and NLD cringe at the thought of networking because of their communication challenges. As a result, they miss out on one of the most effective ways of researching a career or landing a satisfying job.*

*The good news is that networking is not limited to crowded job fairs or after-hours "mixers." There is an alternative strategy that allows you to focus on one person at a time in a more relaxed setting.*

*It's called informational interviewing and it's an effective technique whether you are exploring careers, looking for a job, or thinking about a vocational change. Instead of asking someone for a job, informational interviewing is about asking people for suggestions and advice. Done well it often leads to referrals for jobs or even job offers.*

## STEP ONE

### Figure out what you want to gain from your networking.

- Are you researching a career or industry?
- Is your goal to stay in the same industry but in a different line of work?
- Do you want to locate companies that may be hiring?
- Do you need advice about how to transfer your skills into a new field?

Limit yourself to one or two clearly defined objectives.

## STEP TWO

**Make a list of all the people in your current network...**and that means all of the people you currently know! Networking contacts can include former co-workers, someone in your college alumni office, people you've volunteered with, family members or family friends, your hair-dresser or your chiropractor. Everyone knows other people and excellent leads can come from unlikely sources.

## STEP THREE

**Tell everyone in your network what you need.** For example, "I'm looking for someone who can help me learn about Web development

jobs;" or "do you know anyone who's in computer programming?" If you don't get a response right away, make a note to follow up in six or seven days.

Other sources of networking contacts are trade associations and professional conferences. Most associations list staff members on their Web sites, and conference agendas usually include speaker names, titles and companies.

## STEP FOUR

**Once you have the name of someone to contact, begin by writing that person a letter.** State your connection to the individual and why you're writing:

"Recently I spoke with Paul Smith and he suggested I contact you. I want to learn about job opportunities in product marketing and Paul said that you might be able to give me some advice."

Or, "I noticed that you're speaking on the topic of computer forensics at the National Forensics Professionals Conference. I'm exploring computer forensics as a career and am eager to hear your suggestions about how to break into the field."

Include two or three sentences about your work experience or education ("For the past 3 years, I've worked in the product development depart-

ment of Widget Works Computers..."). End with a call to action: "I'd like to arrange a brief meeting to get your ideas about how I can apply my skills in product marketing. I hope you won't mind a call next week to set up a time. If it's more convenient you can reach me at 555-234-5678." Include your resume with the letter.

Keep a networking list or spreadsheet of everyone you contact, including their title and company, address, telephone number and email. Keep copies of your letters so that you remember where you got the contact name and what information you requested. It is very important to have this information for your follow up calls.

## STEP FIVE

**Follow up with a telephone call.** If calling makes you nervous, edit your letter into a script that you can use on the phone. Keep your message brief – four to five sentences or about 30 seconds. Practice your message until you're comfortable, but don't over rehearse.

If you get voice mail, leave a message. If you don't get a reply after three or four days, call again or send an email. If three attempts don't get a response move on to other people. Don't get discouraged; not everyone will say "yes."

## STEP SIX

**Prepare for your networking meeting as if it was an actual job interview.**

- Research the individual and his or her company beforehand.
- Write down and practice the questions you plan to ask.
- Pay careful attention to your grooming and wear professional clothing that's clean and pressed.
- Bring extra copies of your resume.
- Arrive on time and greet the person you're meeting with in a professional manner – establish eye contact, smile, shake hands, and introduce yourself ("Hello, I'm John Jones, it's nice to meet you").

Open-ended queries yield better results than questions that can be answered with a simple

"yes" or "no." Here are some examples of open-ended questions:

- What is a typical day like in your job?
- How much interaction do you have with others?
- What surprised you about this job/career/organization/industry?
- How did you get your job?
- What does it take to be successful in this job/career/organization/industry?
- What kind of education/experience is needed for this work?
- How did you advance in your career?
- What do you think the job prospects are for someone entering this field?
- Which industry associations are you active in?
- Who else do you think I should talk to?

Respect the time of the people you meet with. Plan on a ½ hour meeting and on asking six to seven questions. If you are uncertain about how much time has gone by, you can ask something like, "Do you have time for two more questions?"

Ask for the person's business card before you leave.

## STEP SEVEN

**Thank the person you met with at the end of the informational interview and again with a letter.** Refer back to your networking list or spreadsheet and add notes about what happened at your meeting. Don't skip this step. You may want to renew contact with certain individuals in the future.

Your thank you letter should refer to specifics of your meeting. For example:

- "Thank you for giving me the Web site of the regional association chapter. I'll plan on attending their next meeting."
- "I will contact John Jones, Sarah Smith and Beth Lewis this week and let you know what happens."
- "I appreciate the article about Web development and will look into the certification program."