

The (real) Apprentice

For graduates, old-fashioned networking is a crucial skill to finding a new job

By Erika D. Smith
KRT CAMPUS

In the same way an introductory e-mail will never replace a firm handshake, blindly sending out resumes will never replace old-fashioned networking.

About 70 percent of all jobs are obtained through networking — the process of building relationships with others in a chosen field.

That's an important statistic at a time when so many people are looking for work. But even in fields that are booming, such as corporate fraud investigation, networking is crucial.

"Networking is pretty much the only way that you get referrals and keep going," said Stephen Nelder, president of the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners' local chapter. "It's one of those things where you make your own luck."

Indeed, luck has little to do with landing a job. It's about networking, and that's a skill — one that many people haven't mastered yet.

Career counselor Carla Owens teaches Kent State University students and alumni the right way to network.

"We teach people to be assertive, not aggressive," said the assistant director of Kent's Career Services Center.

And there is a difference. The trick, Owens said, is to phrase questions in the third person.

For instance, instead of asking a colleague, "Can you get me a job at your law firm?" you should say: "Do you know if there are any openings at your firm?" The latter question is more likely to put a networking contact at ease because he won't feel any direct obligation to you.

That, in fact, is one of the cardinal rules of networking — don't ask a contact for a job. Others include being honest, not taking advantage of a contact, not claiming to know someone you don't and always getting permission to use a contact's name.

Networking doesn't have to be hard. It doesn't require attending fancy dinner parties to mingle. But it does require some initiative.

For students and out-of-work alumni just getting started, Owens recommends building a list of potential contacts. They can be relatives, colleagues from an old job, professors, classmates, friends, your dentist, or even your yoga partner.

Once you talk to each person and figure out if a networking relationship is appropriate, you can send them resumes and cover letters. It's also important to keep in touch as time passes.

"You're getting your name out there," Owens said. "You're mixing, you're mingling."

Another way to feel out a list of contacts — as well as the direction of your own career — is to do an informational interview.

Job hunters should call a contact already working in their desired field and set up a time to talk. Informational interviews are not job interviews, and shouldn't be treated as such.

The goal is not to sell yourself. It is to learn as much as possible about the contact's job and decide if the field is right for you.

Owens said she often recommends informational interviews for alumni who have lost their jobs.

"A lot of them are taking this time to refocus their careers," she said.

Just as many alumni are renewing ties to professional organizations. Some had let their memberships lapse after graduation and are joining again to do some networking.

"Networking is essential in my line of work," said Nelder, founder of Investigative and Forensic Accounting Services LLC.

Knowing that's true for many fields, Brian McCullough, president of Resumewriters.com, decided to take networking one step further — to the Internet.

The company's new site, Wherearethejobs.com, is built on the idea of using friends, and friends of friends, to find a job.

It differs from the likes of Monster.com and Careerbuilder.com because users do more than post their resumes or send them to random employers.

Wherearethejobs.com users are required to post one job lead to join the Web site. They also must build their own community of job seekers by urging others to join for free.

"We would just hear constantly, 'I've posted my resume on Monster like 300 times and I've heard nothing,'" McCullough said.

What's missing, he said, is the advantage of dropping a name. Wherearethejobs.com lets people do that. It's a cross between



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Don Snyder, a career specialist at The Career Services Center at Kent State University, helps Chris McDade research potential marketing internships. The center helps students and alumni searching for jobs and internships.

Monster.com and Friendster.com.

The idea is that a friend of a friend's brother will be the hiring manager at a law firm and let you use his name. And with the Internet, the scope of social networking can be much broader.

Right now, McCullough's Web site covers all of North America and has 10,000 users — nothing compared to Monster's 25 million and Careerbuilder's 7 million. Wherearethejobs.com only launched in mid-January, though, and is still being developed.

"Most of the jobs are found through your friend's brother's uncle," he said. "We wanted to use that."

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