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Networking: A return on your career investment

By Jon Boroshok, Contributor
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"It's not what you know, it's who you know" is an outdated clichÉ. Today, what's really important is that the right people know that you know your stuff. It's all about networking -- and letting well-placed contacts know that you've acquired new skills, knowledge and experience.

Networking contacts don't have to be people in both the same

For many IT professionals, networking often requires developing new people and communications skills. Since techies are most comfortable in their own environment -- behind a computer -- many have turned to online networking, leading to the rise of online contact tools Plaxo (www.plaxo.com) and Internet-based networking tools such as LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com).

industry and the same job field. Expand your horizons.
C.J. Hayden
author,
Get Hired Now!

While some use LinkedIn as a vanity Rolodex to show the world who they know, others use it to get down to serious business.

Thomas Schulz, now a forecasting manager for Hewlett-Packard in Palo Alto, Calif., said LinkedIn enabled him to find hiring managers at Silicon Valley companies, and his investigation resulted in several invitations to submit his resume.

"LinkedIn was primarily effective in that I could directly get my resume in front of the hiring managers without going though HR," Schulz said.

"While none of these opportunities eventually materialized, they could have easily turned into offers if there had been a better fit between my skill set and the job requirements."

One major mistake people make is putting off networking until it's time to find a new job, according to C.J. Hayden, author of Get Hired Now! and Get Clients Now! (www.getclientsnow.com).

"Everybody knows they should do it before they need it, but it reality, they don't," said Konstantin Guericke, vice president of marketing for LinkedIn of Palo Alto, Calif.

In the last month, about 4,000 PeopleSoft employees have joined LinkedIn. Could that be a result of job insecurity inspired by PeopleSoft's recent acquisition by Oracle Corp.? "Some people look at it as an investment for the future," Guericke added.

Some IT professionals seem to pop up at one networking event after another, where they keep running into the same job seekers.

But networking experts recommend a focused and targeted aim. "Don't spread [yourself] too thin by joining too many groups," advises Roberta Chinsky Matuson, founder and principal of Human Resource Solutions (www.yourhrexperts.com) in Brookline, Mass. "Get involved with one, so people get to know you."

Ask Liz Ryan, CEO of Boulder, Colo.-based WorldWIT (www.worldwit.org), an online networking organization for professional women in business. She suggests using groups such as WorldWIT -- which is free to join -- to learn which local networking events are worthwhile. "You can't waste your time meeting everyone on the planet. Be focused in your networking," Ryan advised.

Ryan also said that bringing a hard copy of resume to a business event is a beyond dated practice.

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She compared it to "an engineer bringing in copies of the code s/he wrote and passing it out. Please! That's not appropriate." Ryan recommended that IT pros print business cards that show contact information and a few relevant bullet points, and those out instead.

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David Nour, managing partner of The Nour Group Inc. in Atlanta, (www.nourgroup.com) advises people to think vertically, and determine where there could be demand. Aim for industries where you won't compete with as many similar people.

Hayden agreed. "Networking contacts don't have to be people in both the same industry and the same job field. Expand your horizons. Some of your best contacts can be people who only have one of those two characteristics in common," Hayden said. "If you are an IT project manager in financial services, get to know both IT project managers in other industries, and other professionals outside your field who work in financial services."

IT professionals need to think more about what they can do for a company than what a company might be able to do for them. Career experts agree the key to successful networking is building relationships, making yourself available to do a professional favor for someone who might be able to return it one day -- and keeping tabs on how companies are growing and changing.

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