

Networking Quick Start for Job Hunters

By Laura Brennan

No one needs their network more than when they're looking for a job. Unfortunately, often one is thrust into the job market without having a deep network of professional connections already in place. What do you do?

You make the most of the network you already have.

You reach out to the people you already know and make a request. Now, you may be a little uneasy about this, but that's because you think the request you need to make is "hire me." And that's scary. That's what I call a Big Ask. But here's the good news: you never, ever have to ask anyone in your network for a job. Take that right off your to-do list. Instead, there is one request you can make that is pure gold when you are job hunting: **Informational Interviews**.

You are going to start by asking the people you know best, and who love you the most, if they know anyone at all in the field you want to go into. You are not going to ask those people for a job, you are going to ask for an Informational Interview, or a chance to learn more about the industry and get some advice. People love to give advice, so asking them for advice is a winning strategy.

Here is your master plan:

Step 1: Define Your Goal

What kind of job are you looking for? In what field? How much does it need to pay? What skills do you have that might be useful? You will need to be able to talk about yourself, what you offer, and what you want. Get it on paper. It doesn't need to be perfect, but get something down so that you can revise as you learn more.

Step 2: Who Do You Know?

Start where you are. You have 8-15 people in your life whom you could call right now who would be willing to help you get a job. They may not know how to help, but they would be willing to try. Think of this as your inner circle. Family, BFFs, mentors. You will speak to (not e-mail!) each one of these people personally.

Here's what you will say:

“Suzanne, as you probably know, I'm looking for a job. Specifically, I'm looking for an entry-level job as an administrative assistant, ideally in an engineering firm. My first step is to find out as much as I can about both the job and the field. Do you know anyone who's an assistant, or anyone who works in engineering, who might be willing to talk to me for 10 minutes about what they do?”

Obviously, you will change the details to match your situation, which is why you figured out what you are really looking for — exactly — in Step 1.

This works whether you're just out of school, mid-career, or looking for a complete change. Think about what you genuinely want to know and tailor your request to get that kind of informational interview.

Asking people for referrals only works when you give them specific parameters that make it easy to say yes. Here, you're not asking anyone to recommend you for a job; you're only asking them to make an introduction so you can get more information. You are tapping into your existing network's network.

Step 3: Follow up

Let's say Suzanne gives me two names: Zane, who's an administrative assistant in a PR office, and Maria, who works in the accounting department of an engineering firm. Here's how you follow up:

Thank Suzanne. Tell her you would love to talk to both of those people. At this point, she will probably offer you their phone numbers or e-mails, or she may offer to call them first. Be sure she has your cell number and e-mail to give them.

Connect with Zane. First, thank him for his time. Remind him that Suzanne thought he'd have some interesting advice for you on your job search, and reiterate that you would only take 10 minutes of his time. In the before times, you would offer to drop by his office because relationships are best made in person, but in the midst of a global pandemic, a phone call is fine. He may suggest Zoom, Skype, or just a plain phone call. Whatever works best for him, thank him and set that up. Don't argue.

Repeat with Maria.

ACK! What happens if Suzanne said she'd get Zane to call me, and he hasn't yet? Wait three days, then e-mail Suzanne the following: "Hi, Suzanne! First I want to thank you for offering to put me in touch with Zane at PR People. As I mentioned, I'm trying to find out as much as I can about being an administrative assistant and especially the things he wishes he knew before taking on his first job. If he can spare ten minutes of his time, I'd be happy to drop by his office/have a quick phone call with him whenever it might be convenient. My e-mail is Me@MeMeMe.com and my cell number is (555) 555-5555. Thanks again for your help!"

This gives her all the necessary information in one place. She can simply forward it to Zane. Make it as easy as possible for people to help you.

Step Four: Ask Questions

An informational interview can be gold. You will find out about the hiring process, mistakes to avoid, even career paths you never imagined. At the same time, you will be making a connection with someone a step up the ladder from where you are now. So be prepared.

Have a list of questions ready and keep it handy; you never know when a call may come in. Here are some to get you started:

- How did you get into the field?
- What do you like about your job?
- What surprised you when you first started?
- What are the top two skills I would need?
- I'm very interested in working in (field). I've started doing informational interviews and I was thinking about taking a class in (specific skill). Do you have any advice on what else I can do to break in?

Always ask for advice. People love to give advice. Never argue or tell them you've already tried that (and you will want to, it's a reflex, so be prepared for it and keep your mouth closed!).

Listen, take notes, and thank them.

Be respectful of their time. After ten minutes say, "This is terrific, I so appreciate you talking to me. I've already taken up ten minutes of your time, and I don't want to overstay my welcome." If they're really busy, they will appreciate it and end the meeting. But most of the

time, they'll wave it away and keep talking. Now you can relax until they signal the interview is over. The ball is in their court.

As the conversation wraps up, here is a great last question: "Thank you so much for your time. This has been really helpful. I have one last question for you: what do you think my next step should be?" This should give you something specific and actionable to try.

Step Five: Take Their Advice

People love to give advice, but more than that, they love to feel they were right. I don't mean this in a bad way at all; we are all human, of course we want to feel valued, correct, and useful. The thing is, most people don't take the advice they're given. And so the advice-giver feels ignored.

As Maya Angelou said, people will never forget how you made them feel.

Whenever someone gives you advice — "You should talk to Amy." "You should rewrite your résumé." "You should take a coding class." — try it out. What have you got to lose? Call Amy, spend 20 minutes finessing your résumé, find a free coding course online. Expect something good to happen from that experience; be on the lookout for it. There's always some benefit, however small. And then you will let them know you followed their advice in your thank you note.

Step Six: Thank Them

You would be astonished how few people thank others for their help. Doing so instantly sets you apart and makes you memorable. Here's how to thank people:

Call or e-mail Suzanne. The conversation has three parts: 1) Thank you for putting me in touch with Maria; 2) Maria was awesome, I learned so much; 3) Let me know what I can do for you. Obviously, you will put this in your own words, but that is the gist. End by suggesting a get-together: invite Suzanne over for coffee (or a Zoom coffee, if we are still pandemic-ing), see if she wants to attend an event with you... Whatever is going on in your life, make room for time with Suzanne. Strengthening your existing relationships is just as important as creating new ones.

Email or write (yes! an actual thank you card!) Zane/Maria. Again, there are three parts to the message: 1) Thank you for taking the time to talk to me; 2) I learned a lot about [being an admin assistant/the engineering field] from you; 3) I especially appreciated the advice on [blank]. I did what you suggested and the results were amazing*: I have three interviews set up for next week. Thank you again.

* Find something amazing to have come out of the suggestion. It can be tangible (three interviews!) or intangible (I got over my fear of cold-calling!), but find something good from the experience.

Bonus! End the e-mail with some interesting information or a link to something *they* are interested in. If they mention a favorite movie, Google it to find a fun listicle (“Eight Things You Never Knew About *Miss Pettigrew Lives For A Day!*”). If their office is full of ceramic pigs, or they have a diploma on the wall, or they mention their son plays the tuba, find something to share that lets them know you *saw* them. You paid attention.

WARNING: Never ask for something in a thank you. The thank you is about them, not you.

Step Seven: Rinse and Repeat

You will go through your BFFs and their referrals pretty quickly. Add each new connection to your network and touch base with everyone when you have good news to share, or when you come across something (an article, an event, an introduction that you can make) that might benefit them.

If they offer to help you, to take a look at your résumé, or to introduce you to someone else, always take them up on it (and thank them afterwards). But these relationships are still too new for you to start making additional requests. You will continue to build them over time, but what to do now?

Look to your outer circles:

Another 10-15 friends who aren't super-close, but who would probably help you if they could. Every group you're in, from the local Dungeons & Dragons club to fellow soccer moms,

has at least a couple of people that you are close to within the parameters of that group. Use that social capital to ask them if they can help set up informational interviews.

Colleagues from past jobs. You may not be close, but you share a history. Reach out to them.

Fellow high school and college alums. You may never have met them, but high school and college ties can run deep. Find some alums who are working in the industry you want to crack and reach out to them. Your high school and college may even have a support structure in place to help you do this.

Speaking of structures, take advantage of any your community has to offer. Your local government or even former employer may have resources for job seekers, your local community college may have job fairs or résumé-writing classes. Take advantage of whatever is available and wow the staff with how professional and classy you are. The people running these programs belong in your network as well.

Join local groups: your Chamber of Commerce, Toastmasters, any professional organizations in your field. Volunteer for something you care about. Be professional, helpful, and open about your job search, and especially how you are focusing on informational interviews.

Reach out via social media to someone who is killing it in your desired field. Twitter, FB, the contact forms on their websites — these are great ways to reach out to someone to ask, again, for a brief interview by phone or by e-mail. In addition to what you may learn, developing these relationships (which starts by taking their advice, reporting back, and thanking them) can help your career down the line.

The critical thing to remember is to help others along the way. Listen for what they need that you can provide. We are social beings; yes, you need your network to help you find openings before they're posted, to help you get interviews, to help you learn what you need to know to land the job. But we also gain by helping others meet their goals. We all rise up together.

Happy job hunting!

Laura