

Networking: Making it work for you

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January 16, 2014

You've heard it time and time again: networking is key to one's job search. Whether just starting out or mid-career, the common refrain elevates the act of networking to some sort of silver bullet, without which one's career trajectory is limited.

There is much truth to that assumption. But considering the overabundance of "must-attend" events these days — and let's be honest, some more tolerable than others — does that mean we must endure every networking opportunity for fear of missing out? Or can we be more discerning in the networking we do and how we approach it?

Be vigilant

"Networking, without a doubt has to be done, it's good for idea sharing and making connections as to what your next job may be," says **Maeve Strathy**, a fundraising practitioner living in Toronto. But, she adds, "It's also important to use your discretion when it comes to events and not to think you have to be at every one."

The point is particularly relevant with the recent upsurge in conversations around the idea of introverts and the different ways they work, live and engage. Thanks in large part to the book by **Susan Cain** (*Quiet: The Power of Introverts*), we've come to understand that introverts, who comprise a big percentage of our workforce, face unique challenges. Throwing oneself at a room full of strangers may top that list.

Strathy self-identifies as an introvert and understands only too well the difficulties. "Networking doesn't come naturally to me," she says. "I'm not enthusiastically drawn to it and it takes a lot of energy, so I'm careful in the ones I go to." When talking to others with the same proclivities, Strathy's advice is clear: "Don't drain yourself of energy. Pick and choose the ones you like. Maybe go three times a year but make sure you engage in those."

One event she's grateful to have chosen for her must-attend list was run by a group of young nonprofit professionals. Celebrating their one-year anniversary, the event included a speech from Toronto's nonprofit networking king, **Paul Nazareth**. Strathy was engaged, inspired and still speaks of that event and her networking mentor with great pride.

Do it right

As someone who makes himself available each day for those needing career advice, is often asked to speak at events and has created a slew of his own events (more on that later), Nazareth is, in many ways, the face of networking in the sector.

“When job searching [at the early stages of one’s career], networking events can actually be no good,” he admits. “There’s a crush of people with whom you have random five-minute conversations about the weather or **Rob Ford**. You’re not actually building relationships with people and you can’t represent yourself.” A lot of industry events are for people growing their career and who already have jobs, Nazareth says.

That said, if approached properly, even those at the start of their careers can gain something – if they approach events effectively. Go into it thinking about setting up meetings with a few folks post-event. And always think about your personal style. “If you’re someone for whom a crowd takes away energy, you need to get in, do what you need to do, and get out.” Introverts need to ask themselves which event on their prospective list will boast the greatest number of individuals who can add value to their career, who they can connect with and set meetings up with later.

Be strategic

Picking and choosing is a strategy not only employed by those less extroverted. It’s also important for any one of us with time limitations and the desire to be more focused in our networking efforts. “Everyone has hopes for successful networking – when you’re able to make meaningful connections with a person that you can help and that can help you,” shares **Lisa Taylor**, president of [Challenge Factory](#), a talent and career management agency focused on individuals making a transition later in life.

One of the programs that the company runs is called Networking with Intent. Taylor offers clients tips on how to network right, whether they are searching for a paid job, a voluntary position or a seat on a board. “This networking component cannot be underestimated especially if you want to do something you haven’t done in the past,” she offers.

“But you can go to an event every breakfast, lunch and dinner and not get anywhere.” So before you sign up, make sure to ask the right questions: Who do you want to meet? Where are they hanging out? What are they going to offer? You also need to recognize why you’re attending the event, she adds. Sometimes you want to learn. In that case, the material and presenters are important. Other times, you just want to meet people so the focus should be less on the presenter and more on making sure you connect with those folks you’ve targeted prior.

Unconventional meetups

For some, unique, more indirect networking opportunities are preferable to the traditional ones. Newcomers looking for career opportunities in Ottawa, for example, may want to connect with a newly created event, a collaboration between [DropInSports.ca](#) and Community Cup (an integration program run by the [Catholic Centre for Immigrants](#) in Ottawa). The monthly networking events offer new, skilled residents with the opportunity to play dodge ball with members of the business community and then mingle post-game at a local bar.

As dropinsports.ca owner, **Christiano Ferraro**, explains these events are win-win for both newcomers looking for work and corporations looking to hire. “What really determines a good fit is their [a hire’s] personality, their concept of teamwork, their values,” he says of the qualities employers typically doesn’t see until much later on, once they’re already invested in their new employee.

“Networking events that are too formalized and structured put people into a box,” Ferraro says. His networking events do the opposite. “This is an untapped opportunity to hire people through sports while looking at the intangibles and getting a feel for whether you could work with that person or not.”

DIY events

The innovative collaboration is a good example of the rise of networking opportunities designed to meet the unique needs of prospective attendees that are not being met otherwise. And of the need for those not finding what they need to simply do it on their own. Nazareth knows this reality only too well, having established a number of his own networking events over the years including: the Social Business Breakfast, Networking for Career Lovers, a few informal events for CharityVillage and a fundraising Director School, aimed at helping fundraising professions become effective leaders.

Using social media as his primary connection tool, Nazareth is gaining momentum each day both with his events and his commitment to help people attain their career goals.

People like Strathy. After meeting with the networking guru for coffee, the two talked about her career path and the fact that she lived in midtown Toronto. Pointing out that there’s a huge community of fundraisers in the area, Nazareth suggested the young professional start her own networking events in the area. So she did. Held every couple of months under the title, Maeve’s Meetup — Strathy’s events are filling needs other couldn’t.

For one thing, most networking events in her field are held downtown; a midtown alternative is appreciated by many in the neighbourhood. For another, there’s something nice about an event not being run by a professional organization. “I go to a lot of events and they’re great but it’s nice that there’s no motive behind this one and it’s more casual,” she explains. “People are connecting on a more personal level, even while professional connections are being made too.”

“Formal events are great,” she adds. “But alternatives are wonderful.”

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