NETWORKING AND INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING

This guide outlines and illustrates two important strategies to use in support of your career development: networking and informational interviewing. If used effectively they will enhance your career exploration, job search and professional development.

Networking

Networking is the process of building relationships and alliances. It is a powerful tool in beginning as well as advancing your career. The essence of networking is to systematically seek out and connect with individuals who can support your career endeavors. This can be in the form of information about career fields, referrals to other professionals, advice on a particular career path or in finding job or internship leads.

Networking is the #1 way that people find jobs nationally and for Binghamton University graduates, therefore you should begin to build your network long before you are looking for a job. Networking is not a process of making cold-calls to people you don't know. It's talking to people you do know or asking them to introduce you to others.

Networking Sources: How do I develop my network? Networking sources are easy to locate.

1. People you know, regardless of what they do. These people may come from several groups:
   - Relatives: Parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, extended family.
   - Friends and Acquaintances: From high school, Binghamton University, or graduate/professional school.
   - Co-workers: From any work or internship experience.
   - Supervisors: From work, internship, volunteer, or work-study experiences.
   - Neighbors: Both at home and in Binghamton.
   - Friends of Parents: Both locally and nationally.
   - Parents of Friends: They can be a great connection also!
   - Teachers/Professors/University Contacts: Not only faculty, but also staff and administrators.

2. People you do not know but to whom you can gain access. Talking with people doesn’t have to be a formal process or one you practice only when job hunting. Chat with people casually -- on a plane or bus, while waiting in lines, at social gatherings, etc. Since most people enjoy talking about their work, initiating conversations can open many doors. These sources include:
   - Alumni Association Professional Network: Through the Alumni Association Professional Network on LinkedIn, you can tap an expansive group of fellow alumni for networking. If you’re looking to learn about career fields, expand your professional network, and or improve you job search strategy, we encourage you to join the LinkedIn subgroup specifically for student-to-alumni professional networking.
   - Professional Associations: Join national organizations and local chapters affiliated with your career field. Attend meetings and initiate conversations. Identify an association by performing an internet search (i.e. “archaeology associations”) or by asking individuals in your field of interest.
   - Job Fairs or Networking Events: The Fleishman Center sponsors a fall and spring Job & Internship Fair. These are a great way to make contacts. Also attend off campus events. Visit the Fleishman Center website for details.
   - Volunteer Work: Getting involved in the community can expand your network. You’ll likely meet an entirely new group of people. Choose an organization that’s related to your profession or offer to help out your favorite charity by doing something that's career-related. By volunteering, you'll get a chance to use your skills, expand your network and make a contribution.
   - Online Social Networks: Social networks such as Facebook and LinkedIn are useful in helping you make connections, so developing and maintaining a good online reputation is of critical importance. Be polite and cautious. If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say it. Remember that adding
comments to blogs and uploading pictures can leave a permanent trail and written record. Posting information online is like sending a postcard -- anyone can see it, and it could get in the hand of the wrong person. Remember to be smart and professional!

Effectively Tapping Your Network

How do you effectively utilize networking contacts for career and/or job or internship advice? Start with the people who seem like an obvious choice. For instance, if you have an interest in careers in science and your aunt works for a biotechnology firm, she would be a good person to contact. People who network often find, however, that it is not the first level of contacts that prove to be the most fruitful. Ask individuals on your networking list if they know anyone who works in your field or industry of interest. Each person has his or her own network(s) and will generally be happy to assist you by making referrals to other contacts. Once you have established a good list of contacts you can move on to informational interviewing.

Informational Interviewing

This is an activity designed to build your network. An informational interview is an appointment that you schedule with a particular individual for the purpose of gaining information about a career field and/or learning about resources and/or leads for internships or jobs. When speaking with people in your network, the key is in asking for information. While the purpose of networking may ultimately be employment, “Can you give me a job?” should not be the first phrase out of your mouth. Instead, your mission is to gather information and in the process establish relationships. Your contacts will be more likely to make referrals to other individuals to help you expand your network as well as keep you in mind for openings if you have established a positive relationship.

You may feel awkward when you start to contact people for informational interviews. Many people feel this way. However, most professionals remember what it’s like to begin and build a career and are happy to help. Also, most people like to talk about themselves, what they do, and generally want to help others. Keep in mind that you may be in a position someday to return the favor and help them. Savvy professionals know networking can be a mutually beneficial process.

Making Contact

1. When you are ready to begin, make an initial contact through e-mail, by phone or letter. Whatever your method of contact, introduce yourself and explain why you are contacting this person. It is important to explain that you are gathering career information. Do NOT ask for a job or internship. If you obtained a contact through a mutual acquaintance, or through the Fleishman Center, remember to reference this source.

2. Request a time to speak with the contact in person or by phone. Ask for between 20-30 minutes of their time. This should always be at the convenience of the person being contacted. If your initial contact is by phone, don’t assume they will be able to speak extensively with you immediately. Ask to schedule a time to talk but be prepared if they indicate that you called at a time when they can speak with you.

Sample Initial Email

Dear _____,

I am a Binghamton University sophomore considering a career in the publishing industry. I am eager to speak with professionals like you to help me learn more about career options and preparation. Mary Jones referred me to you.

Learning about your career path and experiences will be helpful to me in better understanding this field and career paths of successful professionals. Would it be possible to set up a 30 minute phone interview in the next two weeks with you to learn more about your education and experience?

Thank you for considering my request. I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Sincerely,

Your Name
Preparing for the Informational Interview

1. **Research the career field.** You can use links on the Fleishman Center website to help you with this. Develop questions based on what you learn, such as, "My research of this field showed that people work 50-60 hours per week, would you agree with this?" Develop questions that help you assess your compatibility with the career/work environment and that test the accuracy of your knowledge and assumptions about the career.

2. **What Do I Ask?**
   The focus of your questions can range from learning about a career field, researching an organization, or searching for jobs or internships. Ask open-ended questions which cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Here are some categories and examples of questions to consider. Coming up with your own specific questions is suggested. Always ask questions in a way that is natural for YOU.

**Questions Related to You**
By sharing some information about yourself, you are giving some clues as to what will be most helpful or valuable for you to know. You are offering a point of reference from which a person can select information to share with you. These invite responses that have meaning within the context of your personal situation. These are important questions and unfortunately the most neglected.

**Examples:**
- I am particularly interested in product safety and consumer protection. To what degree does your work with the Chamber of Commerce involve these or related issues?
- I'm generally most productive in a quiet reflective environment, and naturally, I've noticed the hustle and bustle here today. To what extent is this atmosphere typical?

These two sample questions offer some information about you, the interviewer. They enable the person being interviewed to focus a response on information that you find of particular interest.

**Questions Related to Information about the Interviewee**
These are probably the most naturally asked. They can produce interesting responses, but they generally provide information particularly relevant to the person with whom you are speaking. You have to be an active listener to get the most from this type of question. Is there a potential tangent you want to pursue? Does the question uncover new territory? Does the response offer something that has meaning to you, because of ideas it expresses, values that surface, problems presented?

**Examples:**
- How did you get into this kind of work?
- What was your undergraduate major and how does it relate to your current work?
- What do you find important in making successful career decisions?
- What do you do?
- Please describe a typical workday.
- What are your general tasks and responsibilities?
- What are the toughest problems that you encounter?
- What do you find most rewarding about your work?
- If you were to leave this work, what other work would attract you?
- If things develop as you hope, what work will you do in the future?
- If you had it to do over again, would you do things differently?
- Do you like your work?
- If you could change two things about your job, what would they be?
- What do you wish someone had told you about work when you were in school?
- If you were hiring someone right now, what would be the critical factors determining your selection?
Questions Related to Information about the Field of Work
These are inquiries about the nature of a profession or particular type of position such as:
• Preparation, training and recommended ways to gain experience
• Future of the field
• Lifestyle
• How hiring decisions are made
• Expected career advancement timelines
• Referrals to other individuals

Examples:
• What are the major challenges facing your profession today?
• What is the typical division of labor in departments such as this one?
• What skills or talents are essential for effectiveness in this job?
• What can I do to best prepare myself for this work?
• What university experiences are really important as preparation?
• What is the typical earning potential in this field? (NEVER ask the person how much money they make)
• How does someone get started in this kind of work?
• How do people find out about position openings in this field?
• Would I need further education to do this kind of work?
• Is there a great deal of job changing in this field?
• How will this kind of work affect my personal life?
• Who hires people to do this kind of work?
• Will this field require evening or weekend work?
• What are the typical job titles in this field?
• What credentials, educational degrees, or licenses are required for entry into this career?

Conducting the Interview
• If you are meeting in person, make sure you have the time, place, and directions. Just like a job interview, plan to arrive about 10 minutes ahead of the actual scheduled time.
• Dress for success in professional clothes. Remember that you want to make a good first impression.
• Carry a small notebook and pen. Refer to your list of prepared questions; stay on track, but allow for spontaneous discussion.
• Always be attentive, polite and pleasant.
• Once inside the organization, look around the work environment – dress code, communication patterns, sense of humor, etc. Is this a place you would want to work?
• Make sure you stay within the time requested. They will appreciate you being respectful of their time. However, if they have more time available they may say that they can meet for longer.
• Bring your resume. Sometimes the individual will ask for it or you can offer to leave it behind for their reference and to share with others as appropriate.
• Make sure you ask for the names and contact information of at least two other people before you leave. This will build your network quickly.

After the Informational Interview
• Make notes for future reference. Record the name, title, address, phone and e-mail of the person with whom you met. Keep this information on file.
• Send a thank you letter or email in a timely manner.
• Take some time to reflect on what you have learned. Have you obtained the information you were seeking? What did you learn from this interview (both positive and negative impressions)? What do you still need to know? Remember, this is one person’s view of the career field. You will need to make up your own mind about a potential career or job opportunity.
• Consider how you conducted yourself during the interview. Did you make a good impression? Keep in mind networking and informational interviewing are acquired skills. Once you learn how to begin and follow through you can use these skills throughout your professional life.

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