**[Networking to find a job? Focus on being generous](http://idealistcareers.org/networking-to-find-a-job-focus-on-being-generous/)**

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We all know the importance of networking: According to a recent study conducted by Amazon best-selling author, LinkedIn Influencer and CEO Lou Adler, [55% of all jobs are filled through the hidden job market](http://www.linkedin.com/today/post/article/20130612170852-15454-hire-economics-don-t-waste-your-time-applying-to-job-postings), a combination of internal promotions and networking. Even more depressingly, [research](http://www.ere.net/2013/05/20/why-you-cant-get-a-job-recruiting-explained-by-the-numbers/) from Dr. John Sullivan, a professor of Management at San Francisco State found that the most competitive companies, such as Google, hire less than 1% of their online job applicants.

Yet, for many job seekers, networking is a soul-sucking process of going to networking events alone, trying to collect a ton of business cards, dodging the question, “What do you do?” and coming home anxious and drained with a stack of business cards that inevitably end up forgotten in a sock drawer.

But networking doesn’t have to (soul) suck. When job seekers identify what they have to offer, they open up a less draining, more personal way to network: through giving. When job seekers stop treating networking as “putting a dollar in the relationship bank to withdraw someday” and focus more on what they can do for their network, they establish credibility and trust, create opportunities to turn chance encounters into long-term one-on-one relationships, put themselves on equal footing with potential employers or referrers, and transform themselves from a networking leech to networking rock star.

So how can you start networking through giving?

**Figure out what you can offer by honing in on a niche skill**

[I teach LinkedIn](http://careermovesjvs.blogspot.com/2013/08/9-steps-to-linkedin-wizardry.html) at my career services job, and that niche (but useful) skill has given me opportunities to speak at events and trainings, meet a lot of amazing people, and feel like I have something useful to say in conversations.

This is a technique all job seekers can adopt: Identify a useful skill for your field and either learn it (I learned how to use LinkedIn from free online guides and webinars) or learn to articulate it if it’s a skill you already have.

I stumbled upon my niche skill thanks to the requirements of my job, but it’s not always that straight-forward. If you are struggling to identify yours, try asking yourself (or a friend or career counselor) these questions:

* **What problems do your friends ask you to solve?** Are you the go-to guy or gal when a computer freezes? When a cover letter needs to be edited? When they’re bored on the weekend? The answer to these questions could lead you to discover a niche skill in tech, communications, or event planning, respectively.
* **How do current or former supervisors, colleagues, or professors describe you?** What strengths do they point out immediately? Are these the same or different attributes than the ones hiring managers in your prospective field are looking for? Ask professional contacts to list a few of your positive attributes to help you hone in on what will make you stand out.
* **What attracts you to the job positions you apply to?** Re-read the last 3-5 jobs you applied to that you really *wanted*. What are the specific skills that you have that matched their wants? What problems are these skills needed to solve? Think about how you can package these unique skills into an offer at a networking event or informational interview.

When the niche skill is well matched to a networking contact’s needs, it gives job seekers a natural way to [transform a one-time encounter into a long-term relationship](http://careermovesjvs.blogspot.com/2013/07/three-steps-networking-before-you-need-job.html). Plus, skills-based networking *shows* instead of *tells* your value to an individual or company, which could lead to job opportunities or referrals.

**Take a fresh look at your network**

Many job seekers think their network is nonexistent, but this isn’t true.

At a recent event I organized, Relationship Management Associate for Root Cause Liz Leberman led an exercise: Everyone wrote down a need they had on an index card (her need was a math tutor for the GMAT), then got together in groups to brainstorm how their network could fulfill each other’s needs. Every single person left with suggestions.

Likewise, someone in your network could fulfill the needs of a professional contact you are trying to make or strengthen. For example, the friend you play basketball with on weekends may also have the aesthetic flair a networking contact needs to design a flyer. Take a critical look at your LinkedIn contacts (sorry, I’m a one-trick pony), phone address book, email contacts, and Facebook friends and think about the niche skills they have.

Facilitating a mutually-beneficial connection between two members of your existing network will help you strengthen your relationship with both parties, by establishing credibility (you know talented people, so you must also be talented) and likeability. If your basketball friend does a bang-up job on your networking contact’s flyer, hidden job opportunities and referrals will open up to you.

**Ask what they need (& do a little homework)**

This may seem obvious, but in the nervousness of meeting someone new, I have found very few job seekers actually ask networking contacts what they need. Without this knowledge, job seekers can’t even begin to network through giving.

Ask new networking contacts some variation of, “If time and money weren’t factors, what problem would you/your company want to solve next?” Don’t be discouraged if the need is outside of your skill set. Do a little homework to see if it makes more sense to develop the solution to the problem as your own niche skill or to connect them to someone in your network who can solve that problem. If you are unable to solve the problem yourself or through your existing network, don’t dismiss the importance of a well-timed link to a helpful article.

Taking the time to assess their needs and then directly fill them in whatever way you can will put you leaps and bounds ahead of the job seekers who never even asked. You will be fulfilling a need, strengthening a connection, and giving them a reason to picture you at their company permanently.

These three techniques for networking through giving even when you feel like you have nothing to give will open up a whole new world of mutual networking. You will establish yourself as the “go-to” person to solve problems within your field, which will lead to more referrals to professionals and hidden job opportunities within your industry. Most importantly, you will feel like a rock star instead of a leech. Although networking through giving should never be seen as “[putting a dollar in the networking bank with the intention to withdraw it someday](http://www.linkedin.com/today/post/article/20130820212106-30084557-how-networking-can-help-you-become-the-best-version-of-yourself?trk=tod-home-art-list-large_0&utm_content=bufferf833d&utm_source=buffer&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=Buffer),” setting up a foundation of generosity, expertise, and likeability will put you in a much better position than job seekers when you are finally ready to make an ask of your network.