

NEXT-LEVEL NETWORKING

You have certainly heard about the importance of networking: “networking is King,” “networking beats resume 100 times out of 100,” “networking eats resumes for breakfast,” “it’s all about networking, networking, networking,” and any number of other clichés describing the importance of building professional relationships as part of a job search strategy. The importance of networking goes beyond building relationships, however; it is the knowledge gained through those relationships, weaved skillfully into resumes and interview performance, that can be the difference between receiving an offer of employment and being a great candidate who finished in second place. Showcasing yourself as a proactive, informed candidate requires what I call next-level networking.

Many job seekers realize that applying for countless jobs with the same resume and hoping for a call back is not a successful job search strategy; they know that some level of networking is required. However, their approach to networking is to take a baseline resume, send it to all their friends and former coworkers. This cannot be the extent of your networking strategy.

Some job seekers recognize LinkedIn as a tool to assist them in their job search. They also understand networking requires them to get out of the house and engage with people, face-to-face. Some job seekers take advantage of job fairs and networking events where they practice talking about themselves and the value they bring to employers. These events are opportunities to learn about employers, their hiring processes, their employee benefits, and their job opportunities. Job seekers might feel that by participating in these events they are networking effectively. This is the bare minimum of how you *should* be networking as an active job seeker, but it is not enough.

There is a group of job seekers who recognize the value of one-on-one conversations with employers they want to join, conversations away from the noisy, chaotic atmosphere of a job fair or networking event. These are conversations that transform them from a name at the top of a resume to a real person, with real aspirations, with sincere curiosity about an organization, and with tangible qualities to offer. You are probably part of this group, proactive in reaching out to the people you recognize as representatives of their organizations; they are the influencers and the super-connectors, with recognized brands in their communities and in social media.

These are great people to connect with and it is important to have them in your network. This might result in increased interviews and, perhaps, even job offers- but you can do more- you can take your networking strategy to the *next level*.

As valuable as the above-mentioned network connections are, they are likely not the *most* valuable people for you to connect with. If you want to be a project manager at Company Y, you need to network with project managers at Company Y. If you want to be a contracting officer at Company Z, you need to network with contracting officers at Company Z. It sounds too simple but surprisingly few job seekers execute this networking strategy.

The people doing the jobs you want to do, in the companies you want to work for can tell you what you need to know- things like:

- The day-to-day of their job
- The most important degrees and/or certifications to have
- What they do and don't like about their job and their company
- The culture of their organization
- Their personal employee experiences

The reason most job seekers are not *next-level* networking is because *next-level* connections aren't always easy to find. They are not typically at job fairs and networking events, and they are not posting content about their companies on social media every day- they are busy working. Proactively leverage LinkedIn as a research tool, Veterati as a digital mentoring platform, and your existing network to help identify *next-level* connections.

When reaching out to *next-level* connections, do it from a place of genuine curiosity. Express your interest in learning more about their jobs and their organizations; ask if they can share *15 minutes* of their time for a phone call, for an informational interview. Have questions prepared before your call and don't exceed the amount of time asked for. This is a research activity; don't ask for help getting a job or for anything that might increase their workload, like reviewing your resume. At the end of your time you could ask for a follow up meeting if you think that would be helpful and not an inconvenience to your new connection. The last question you should *always* ask is, "is there somebody else you can introduce me to in your organization to help me learn more about... *fill in the blank....?*"

Informational interviews will yield useful information and language to include in your resume and to weave into your interview performance. Ideally, when you apply for a job with an organization, you will be positioned to reach out to your *next-level* connections to say, "I appreciate the time you have shared with me during our several conversations. I have learned much about your organization and would love an opportunity to join the team. I wanted to let you know that I applied for... *fill in the blank...*; based on what you have shared with me I think I would be a great addition to your company because... *fill in the blank...*," or something to that effect. If you have made a positive impression, this empowers your *next-level* connections with the opportunity to advocate for you within that organization.

Do not get discouraged if *next-level* connections are not as responsive as you would like; they have job requirements that likely don't include reacting to job seeker inquiries. You may have to reach out to a dozen *next-level* connections to get 3 or 4 responses. Keep at it, and always remain proactive, professional, patient and persistent.