

**A Recruiter's Guide to Mining Your Network**  
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[How to make the most of the connections that will lead to your next job.](#)

I launched a search recently for a president and CEO of a national health association. Within the first few days I received e-mails from two people recommending that I consider Mary J. I had never met Mary, but I was impressed with the recommendations from people in her network and decided that I should probably interview her. Three months and 105 applicants later, the board hired Mary.

If you, like Mary, think it's time to look for a new job within the association community, you need to think systematically about the elements of a successful job search. Your ability to land a new leadership position will depend on several variables, including your track record in the positions you've held so far, your skill at identifying openings, the strength of your resume and cover letter, your interviewing skills, the quality of your references, and your salary aspirations. But based on my experience as an executive search consultant, I predict that none of these will come close to the importance of your network.

Your network is made up of people, such as current and former colleagues and friends, who know that you are ready for a new opportunity and can possibly contribute to that effort. But it also includes colleagues of colleagues and friends of friends--and colleagues of friends and friends of colleagues--people whom you do not yet know but will soon meet and add to your network.

This may sound obvious. But building a network is where many job hunters, especially those at the top levels of management, fall short by giving up too easily after a cursory effort. You'll have greater success if you develop a straightforward structure for making the most of your connections, even if your job hunt lasts longer than you wish it to.

**Understanding the value of your network**

Your network--or, more precisely, the people you put into your network--can do several things for you.

- 1. Identify openings that might interest you.** No one person--not even the most highly regarded search consultant in town--knows of all job openings. But everyone knows of at least one opening.
- 2. Put in a good word on your behalf.** Because so many employers depend on recommendations from trusted sources, you significantly increase your chances of being invited for an initial interview when a member of your network can recommend you. Then, once you've had an interview or two, this person may be able to serve as a reference.
- 3. Provide intelligence about potential opportunities.** They can give you insights into a particular organization, position, or person--insights that will help you decide whether some openings are worth pursuing and, if so, how to tailor your pitch.

**4. Keep your spirits up.** Looking for a job is rarely easy; you should expect scores of disappointments before the search ends successfully. There will be some moments--especially if you're without a job--when you just need to be in touch with another person who's not going to turn you away. By simply talking to you and trying to be useful, people in your network can help you remain positive and keep moving ahead.

### **Creating and working an effective network**

You don't have to be a wildly extroverted, life-of-the-party type to build a great network of informants. And you don't need a bulging Rolodex at the outset of your search. You simply need a systematic, disciplined approach to identifying people who might be helpful and the initiative to remind them periodically that you're still looking. Here's a suggested structure.

**1. Make a list of 40 people.** These should be the individuals who are best equipped to tell you about openings, provide general intelligence, put in a good word at the right moment, or help keep your spirits up. Obviously, you should exclude people who, if they knew you were searching, could leave you vulnerable at work. In any case, consider people who

- work where you currently work;
- worked with you in previous jobs;
- used to work where you work now;
- know you through professional associations or alumni groups;
- know you through your community activities;
- live in your neighborhood; or
- got to know you while attending college or graduate school.

Coming up with 40 names might seem daunting at first, but don't be discouraged if it takes more than a few minutes to put together a list. This exercise is most useful when it stretches your thinking beyond the obvious group of colleagues and friends.

When Rafael J. was looking for a new leadership job, one of the most valuable members of his network was Stanley T., the president of a major nonprofit organization, who had once considered him for a top job but ultimately hired somebody else. Nonetheless, when Stanley learned about a search I was conducting for a vice president slot at a national association, he recommended Rafael. Unfortunately, we were close to completing the search and not eager for new candidates, but Rafael did become one of my top candidates for an even better job a few months later.

**2. Write to everyone on your list.** I suggest sending each person a personalized letter (by mail or e-mail). Do this across a four-week period. Write to the first 10 during the first week, the second 10 the next week, and so on. Enclose your resume along with a brief cover letter explaining what you'd like to do next and expressing your hope that they can help identify potential openings or other people you should contact. Close the letter by saying you'll follow up in a few days with a phone call.

Make it clear that you are not asking them for a job. Because most of your contacts will not have an opening that matches your skills and experience, you don't want them to misinterpret your request, say they have nothing, and shut the door.

**3. Call to schedule a short talk--in person, if possible.** Ask if you can meet for a brief (20- to 30-minute) conversation. If a face-to-face meeting is not possible, talking by phone is an acceptable, albeit less than ideal, alternative.

If you can meet the individual in person, suggest doing it over coffee, not over lunch or another meal. You should be busy talking, listening, and taking notes, none of which is easy to do while eating. In addition, finding time for coffee (which can take place at any time of day) is much easier than scheduling lunch, and you'll also take less of your contact's valuable time.

**4. Ask about openings or further contacts.** For your meeting, take another copy of your resume in case your contact does not bring the original along. Open the conversation by describing your objectives: what your ideal next job would be like or perhaps your primary one or two areas of interest. Then ask your contact if he or she knows of any openings that might meet those objectives.

If the person does have an opening or two to tell you about, get all the particulars and find out whether you can or should mention the person by name if you decide to pursue the openings. But don't be surprised or disappointed if the person has little or nothing to offer. Even when contacts don't know of a potential opening now, they may hear about something a few days later and will likely remember to tell you.

Whether your contacts suggest openings or not, also ask them the key question that will help you build your network: "Can you identify at least three other people whom I should contact to discuss my search?" Similar to the initial 40 members of your network, these do not have to be people with jobs to offer. They just need to be useful members of your network. Find out the relationship your contact has with each person and whether you should use the contact's name when you write the new person to ask for a meeting.

**5. Repeat the contact cycle with the new names.** Send your letter and resume via mail or e-mail, follow up by phone, meet over coffee, and then pursue leads of possible openings and new names to contact. If after a month you've talked to all 40 people on your initial list and each has given you three names, you will have 120 new names. That's a total of 160 people in your network, many of whom you did not know at the outset. Even if you reach only half of your initial 40 and each of these 20 people gives you only two names, you'll have 40 new names to add to the initial 40. Keep this up for a few months and the numbers will continue to expand. You may even have trouble following up in a timely way with all the new people or on all the suggestions that each person offers.

That's when you know your network is working.

Of course, you shouldn't pester the members of your network or waste their limited and valuable time. That's why you send your letter and resume to them before calling and why you want to meet briefly over coffee instead of lunch. But don't let the relationship stop there. As helpful as your contacts want to be, they don't wake up each morning asking themselves, "What can I do today to help [insert your name here] find the right job?" Many will forget, so it's important to remind them periodically that you're still looking.

After you complete the initial round with contacts, send them an e-mail every 60 days or so to quickly let them know that you haven't yet found the right job and to see if they have new ideas. I found one of the best jobs of my career when I informed one of my contacts, for the third time

during the course of several months, that I was still looking. He had several helpful suggestions the first two times, but none had materialized into the right fit, and neither had anyone else's.

But this third time he told me, "Glad you called. Yesterday we announced the creation of a new organization and the appointment of its first executive director. She'll be looking for a deputy; let me pass your material to her." I got that deputy job a few weeks later.

I can assure you that almost everyone in your network will want to help. Some will be of marginal benefit or even useless. A few will actually be very helpful. One will be of incalculable value. So establish, build, and cultivate your network with confidence.

### **Closing the loop**

Even when you end your search, your network will still have value. It will include some people who might be helpful colleagues in your new job and many who will be useful in your next search--which you hope won't be soon, but one never knows. So don't abandon this new set of contacts once you're done looking. At a minimum, send them all a note when you complete your search, tell them how it ended, and thank them for their help.

You've heard the saying, "It's not what you know; it's who you know." But in finding the right job, "It's not who you know; it's who knows you." Networking is the best way to quickly expand the number of people who know you and know that you're available.

Charlotte B. applied for a chief financial officer position that I conducted a search for last year. She learned about it from William B., who had been aware of my search for at least a couple of months and had already recommended a candidate who didn't pan out. Charlotte turned out to be the ideal candidate and got the job a few weeks later. Charlotte was William's wife. So when you create that network, don't forget the people under your own roof.

*This article is reprinted with the permission of [Larry Slesinger](#), founder and CEO of Slesinger Management Services, an executive search firm for nonprofit organizations in the Washington, D.C., area. This article is drawn from his book Search: Winning Strategies to Get Your Next Job in the Nonprofit World (2004, Piemonte Press).*

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