

Networking at 50-Plus

You're working on your job search. You've done your due diligence and understand the importance of networking, but if you're over 50, the traditional networking rules of going to professional meetings and handing out business cards won't be enough. Experience is a good teacher. Here are some lessons older job seekers may not realize they've learned.

Know Your Sweet Spot

First, you must be clear about what type of job or company you're networking for, says Keith Ferrazzi, author of [*Never Eat Alone and Other Secrets to Success, One Relationship at a Time*](#). Younger applicants are generally broader in scope. However, "the more ambiguous you are, the tougher it is," says Ferrazzi. "Older folks should have a clear understanding of their sweet spot: Where they'd be good and why. When you're over 50, you've got credibility. Give clarity to the experience that's behind your focus."

"Ask anyone who cares about you," Ferrazzi adds. "You never know who'll play golf tomorrow with the person you talk to today. You don't know who your dentist knows or who your brother-in-law knows at work." These people have "a higher level of confidence recommending someone over 50 than someone who's stretching for a job," he says. Besides, they have more contacts than younger people.

Be Your Age, Just Don't Act It

Older people tend to be more reserved when asking about potential contacts or jobs. "Get over it," Ferrazzi says. "Act like a young person." But, notes Daniel J. Kadlec, author of [*The Power Years: A User's Guide to the Rest of Your Life*](#), "never appear desperate. You want people to recognize your accomplishments and professionalism before they recognize you're job hunting. Of course, you're not; you're simply open to new opportunities."

Find a Mentor; Be a Mentor

Ferrazzi encourages more than reaching out to younger people -- ask them to mentor you. Jack Welch, former chairman and CEO of General Electric, had a 25-year-old mentor and assigned 20-something mentors to his top executives. "Don't be embarrassed to ask how the world works today," says Ferrazzi. In return, you can mentor your mentors by offering your own experience.

Not Your Mother's -- or Father's -- Networking

One way the world works, of course, is online. "This is not your mom-and-pop networking anymore," says Jean Cummings, a personal branding strategist and resume consultant who works with many 50-plus executives. "Today, the Internet is key, even

for job seekers who did not grow up with it." Business Web sites like [LinkedIn](#) and social sites like [Eons](#) are "good ways to connect with people in your target companies and in your field."

So is the [Business Network International](#), which bills itself as "the world's largest referral organization" and includes regional chapters and vast databases. The [AARP](#) has business and social community boards, and the [Human Capital Institute](#) recently sponsored an excellent webinar (online seminar containing audio and video) aimed at older job seekers.

Make Time for Face Time

After identifying contacts, arrange face-to-face meetings, Cummings says. If the organization where you seek to work is accessible, such as a local business or small company, simply walking in is an effective way to get a brief interview, she adds. "You'll immediately separate yourself out from those who only send paper and electronic resumes."

When reaching out to contacts, "articulate your personal brand," Cummings says. "Put the emphasis on what you uniquely bring to a job in terms of experience, wisdom, savvy and knowledge. Offer a sense of the challenges and opportunities their organization may be facing, and your thoughts on how you can improve their ability to make money, save money, limit risk, innovate and solve problems."

Don't apply only for posted jobs, Cummings says. "Since you're able to talk the language of your business or industry, and you're up on the latest trends, ask your contacts about jobs still in proposal or development stages. You could help create your own new job."

Cummings also suggests networking through trade associations you already belong to. Call people with whom you've worked on past projects. Many association Web sites have active discussion and bulletin boards.

Kadlec offers these additional hints: "Raise your profile by authoring an op-ed in your local newspaper, or maybe even a regular column. Give speeches to local clubs. Join some boards, and help out with a charity. These are all good ways to impress people who may be in a position to hire or recommend you."

Networkers' Biggest Mistakes

Many people think that networking means chit-chatting and wholesaling your business cards. Think again.

What You Could Do Today?

If you expect networking to pay off career wise, create opportunities for substantive interaction. For example, join your professional association's program committee or volunteer to serve on your favorite nonprofit board. When you meet people who impress you -- a speaker, a coworker, an author or someone at a conference -- ask them to do a project with you, like an article or presentation

Broaden Your Network

Completely unscientific studies show that many people find their jobs through people they already know. It's amazing that this ever happens at all since most people are so reluctant to tell anyone they know that they're looking for work. And the more they need the job, the less likely they are to tell anybody who might actually be able to help.

Part of getting your career in shape is building up your awareness of relationships with people. You also need to practice asking people questions and telling them you're looking. It does not come easy to most -- but managing your career and building your networking skills are critical to finding a rewarding job.

Here's a good exercise. Do this one even if you don't need a job at the moment. Think of the kind of job you want: Graphic designer? Marketing analyst? Then think about the cities or even countries you would like to work in. Create a system for organizing these details.

Now, think of the people you know who can get you the details you need to get started. Contact them and explain what you're looking for. The people you contact should be plugged in to the business and also have a real connection -- former coworkers or bosses, someone who works within your desired industry, or has experience you can learn from, for example.

Ask your contacts about three things:

Jobs

Ask if they have heard about any openings in the industry. If nothing comes to mind immediately, don't give up. Unless your contacts have very recently talked with friends or a recruiter who's trying to fill a specific slot, chances are slim that they may know of any openings.

People

Ask your contacts for names of people who might be of help to you. It may be a friend from another company or a recruiter at a search firm. And, of course, ask if you can use their names. Everyone knows someone, so use this to your advantage.

Qualifications

Get feedback from your contacts. Ask them what you can do to make yourself a stronger candidate for the kind of job you want. Use this as a test closer. If a contact can't think of a single thing that would make you a more attractive candidate or can't think of anyone you can talk to, then he probably isn't the best contact. Thank the person and move on.

If your contacts are interested in you and your plans, they will have at least a couple of suggestions. They may suggest you look at a different kind of job, something they think you'd be better suited for or something that would be good preparation for the kind of job you want. Listen closely, because the message behind what they say will be one of three things -- "I believe you can do this now," or "I believe that with some preparation you could do this someday" or "I don't believe this is the right path for you."

Work through this exercise several times. Remember: Practice makes perfect. Whatever you do, don't stop after just one, particularly if it's a negative experience. A bad experience could mean you selected the wrong person. There are millions of people out there willing to help. By the time you've done this exercise a few times, you will have developed a pretty good picture of the kind of candidate you are for the type of job you want, and you'll have strengthened your relationships with some people who can help.