

Compiling a Stellar Contact List

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published on BNET.com 5/02/2007

Networking with people in your industry is important throughout your career, not just when you're searching for a job. Those who have good contacts in their profession have more and greater opportunities to achieve their goals than those without contacts. Not only will you need to make a list of contacts, you will need to set up a system for keeping track of the contacts you make. Here are some questions to keep in mind:

- What are your major career issues right now?
- What are your major career goals at this point in your life?
- What networks do you have that can be helpful to you?
- What networking activities can you participate in that will build up your contact list?
- What system do you have in place to record and maintain your contact list?
- What do you have to offer to people on your contact list?

What You Need to Know

Can my contact list help me with my search for a new job?

Yes. A good contact list is integral to a successful job search. Contacts can provide information on industry trends, tipping you off about possible developments before they occur. If you are interested in a particular kind of job, a contact may be able to fill you in on its rewards and drawbacks. A good contact can also inform you of the likelihood that a particular organization might be hiring, and on specific job openings.

Do I need a contact list if I'm not looking for a new job? I'm happy where I am right now.

The reality of the modern job market is that you never know when you might suddenly find yourself looking for a job. People you have kept in touch with are more likely to be helpful to you when job hunting than if you come to them out of the blue. And contact lists are useful for furthering your career even when you are content in your current position. People in your field who are not in your organization can give you a broader perspective on your profession. Colleagues in your organization can provide important strategic information that will help you make effective career decisions.

Members of professional associations can encourage you to get more involved and can increase your visibility and help you to gain more knowledge.

What is the best way to develop contacts outside my organization?

If you have not already joined the professional associations for your field, join now. Get involved in those associations: attend meetings and conferences, volunteer for committees, or run for office. The more involved you become, the more people you will meet, broadening your contact list.

I've heard that that human resources professionals are the best point of contact in an organization. Is that true?

Only if you are looking for a position in human resources. If not, you should be developing contacts with people who make the hiring decisions.

What to Do

Determine Your Major Career Issues

Identifying your reasons for building an awesome contact list is an important first step in building your list. The two key reasons people use contact lists are (1) job hunting and (2) professional development. If you are job hunting, your contact list should be composed of people who can provide you with information about the job market and who may be able to help you locate specific job openings. If job hunting is not your current focus, you will want people on your contact list to help you to learn more about your field, to solve particular professional problems, or to mentor you.

Build Strong Relationships *Before* You Need Help

In today's fast-paced climate, people have limited time. They are more likely to respond to someone they know and trust than to a stranger who is asking for help. Therefore, you want to begin building your contact list before you need to call on people for help or advice. As you begin to build contacts, keep in touch regularly with people just for the sake of keeping in touch. Then, when you really need their help, they will more readily give you their time and expertise.

Identify Your Different Networks and for Each One, Create a List of Everyone You Know

Each of us belongs to three basic types of network: a personal network, a professional network, and a work-life network. Create a separate list for each of these, and identify everyone you know within each one.

In your personal network, list your family, friends, neighbors, and everyone with whom you interact in your personal life. Those on this list include the people you know through community organizations, places of worship, or through your children's school.

A list of people from your professional network should include former and current coworkers and supervisors, teachers or professors, and colleagues who are members of professional organizations. You also might add suppliers or customers of your organization, consultants, speakers, and authors in your field whom you have met.

The people who are in your work-life network are those who are professionals in the career and outplacement field, such as executive recruiters, college placement officers, and career counselors.

Keep Track of Your Contacts

There are several different types of system that you might consider. Less than ten years ago, the most common contact organizer was probably an index card or rolodex system, but now the most common systems are:

- personal digital assistant (PDA) such as a BlackBerry, or other electronic organizer systems
- computer software systems, such as Microsoft Access(tm) or Microsoft Outlook(tm).

When deciding which system to use, think about how you will use it. Will you be at your desk in the office, or at home, or will you be traveling? Perhaps you will use your contact list in all of these places. If you need your list to be portable, using a PDA may be your best choice. Along with the person's name, you will want to record all of their contact information, such as address, phone numbers, e-mail, Web site address, pager number, and any other contact information that you might need. It is helpful if you include personal information such as birthday, names of family members, hobbies, or other details that will jog your memory about your connections with this contact. Finally, you need room to include information about when you contacted the person, what transpired, and when you should get back to them.

Create a “Tickler File”

A “tickler” file is helpful if you need to connect with people in your contact list on a regular basis, for example, once a month. Instead of organizing names alphabetically, divide up your contacts into four groups, one for each week of the month. During week one, call all the people in the first group. During week two, call all the people in the second group, and so on. This system is particularly good for people who are in sales or public relations, but it also might be useful occasionally for people who are job hunting.

Offer, Don’t Just Take

Remember that maintaining a contact list is just like maintaining relationships. It’s a two-way street. If you call only when you need something, people will eventually think of you as an energy drain and will avoid you. Always think about what you can give in return. When you ask a contact for help, also ask if there is anything that you can do for him or her. Each time you call, make sure you take the time to listen to the person you have called.

Say “Thank You”

Every time you interact with someone on your contact list, make sure you find a way to express your appreciation. People are much more likely to be responsive to your calls if they feel that their time is respected and valued.

What to Avoid

You Have a Great System, But You Don’t Use It

The most complete and organized system in the world is useless if you don’t put it to work. Some people may freeze up when it comes to actually making calls. Some people may have difficulty finding time for networking in a busy schedule full of commitments to work and family. Just like anything else worthwhile, you have to decide to make it a priority. Commit to a certain time of day when you will make your calls and a certain number of calls per day or week. Giving yourself incentives for doing the work can help motivate you.

You Use the “Shoebox” Method of Creating a Contact List

This is the method of writing people's contact information down on a slip of paper and then throwing it in a box or a drawer to look at later. Usually business cards get tossed into this pile as well. In this scenario, collecting contact information is easy. Actually making use of the information, however, becomes next to impossible. Maintaining a contact list takes time. The more time you invest into developing contacts and recording their information in an organized system, the more valuable your list will be.

You Don't Follow Up

After all the effort you put in to making an initial contact with someone, don't waste it by getting their promise of help but not following up. All the hard work is in making the first call. If you don't follow up and keep your commitments to stay in contact, you lose credibility with the people in your networks. This is where the tickler file or a similar system can come in handy. Schedule time in your calendar or on your to-list to make those follow-up calls.

Where to Learn More

Web Site:

Job Hunters' Bible: www.jobhuntersbible.com