

## NETWORKING BASICS AND TIPS



**Summary:** *Learn what networking is and some tips on effective networking that will benefit you and your career.*

What is networking? I define it as an effective method of using available sources and tailoring your approach to obtain information that will lead to further opportunities. Notice that nowhere in this definition do the words "job" or "employment" appear. Instead, the definition concentrates on "opportunities." Eventually, networking will lead to a job or permanent employment; but only if the person conducting the job search develops the right philosophy and identifies the right contacts that will lead to employment.

What does networking entail? It involves identifying and researching potential companies or employers with the intention of answering one primary question — "will this company have interest in someone with my educational background?" If the answer is yes, the next step is to identify the person most likely responsible for hiring the position you could fill. Once this is determined, the objective is to write to that person — not for a job — but for advice. You are telling this person that you value their opinion, and asking if he or she could possibly suggest a company or individual who would have interest in you. If the person you contacted has a position to fill — GREAT! You have succeeded in getting your name and résumé in front of the right person. If they do not have a position available, you still have made contact with someone who is knowledgeable about the industry, and can very possibly point you in the right direction.

What are the important issues involved in networking? First and foremost, it involves determining the right companies to target. For example, if you are a mechanical engineering graduate with an interest in machine design, you will want to concentrate your efforts on identifying companies that utilize this expertise. Identifying these sources is beyond the scope of this article, other than to note that the list of available sources is endless. Alumni groups, trade groups, engineering societies, friends, relatives, trade magazines and professors are all excellent sources of information.

The investigative portion of networking depends on how good you are at obtaining information. Thomas Register is one of the best sources on manufacturing companies. Regional directories are also available, which provide information such as products manufactured, annual sales, number of employees, and names and titles of key employees. After you have established that a particular company might be interested in your background, you must also identify the person who would be responsible for hiring. Depending on the size of the company, this could be anyone from the president to a foreman.

### **Networking: "Making Contact"**

Once you have identified this person, the next task is to write him or her a cover letter. It is imperative that you develop your writing skills so that you can write a letter that "diplomatically" requests assistance. The letter should be one page and contain three to four brief paragraphs. The first paragraph will contain your introduction and state why you are writing. The second paragraph should contain some information concerning what you want to do, how your education or limited work experience relates to your objective, and possibly reference why your background may be applicable to a particular industry. The third paragraph might reference your résumé, or you may simply wish to make it your concluding paragraph. It is important to thank the person and mention that you will be contacting him or her.

In addition to your letter, it is important to attach a well-written resume. There are numerous sources available for obtaining assistance when composing your résumé. There are also many opinions on what should and should not be included in a résumé. Overall, the engineering profession is somewhat conservative, and therefore, approach the résumé with this in mind. A recent article indicated that résumés are a thing of the past, and a well written letter is the "preferred" approach. Perhaps in some professions, but not engineering. The résumé gives you the opportunity to tell the potential employer what you have to offer. Since you are a soon-to-be or recent graduate, I strongly recommend that you limit your résumé to one page. Besides your education, limited work experience, and some secondary information such as your extracurricular activities, there is little additional information that would be of interest to a potential employer. Remember that you are seeking an entry level position; you are not expected to have extensive work experience. Therefore, you should be able to include all pertinent information on one page. In some instances, where you have considerable coursework (relating to your discipline), you may wish to include a separate sheet which lists your courses. This is generally more appropriate for the people with dual degrees, a Master's degree, etc.

Once you have developed your writing skills and have established a good cover letter and résumé, it is time to begin making contact. You have identified potential employers or "targets" and have mailed out your first letter. I suggest you wait a week (minimum) before following up. Experience dictates that this is the most difficult part of networking. It boils down to this: you have written to someone (you have never met) and are asking him or her to help you find a job. It's easy to talk yourself out of it. DON'T DO IT! Experience has also shown me that most people will be willing to help. You have taken the time to write to someone to express that you value his or her opinion and would appreciate some advice. Most people will consider this a compliment and will be willing to offer some assistance.

Once you have gotten over the hurdle of picking up the phone to make the call, the rest depends on how well you can relate to this person. As mentioned above, there may be a position available and your contact may want to meet you. He or she may have passed your résumé on to another individual in the company; if this the case, call that person. If you are told that your résumé was sent to the Personnel Department, it is safe to interpret that there is nothing available at that company, but you can still continue to pursue advice from this person. The key is to be persistent, yet diplomatic! Chances are that in researching your target you have learned about the industry in which this company participates. Ask about potential opportunities with customers, suppliers, or even competitors. Your goal is to get that person to provide you with valuable advice.

In most cases, your contact person will be helpful. It is important that you write and express your thanks. Not only does it show that you are appreciative and considerate, it also helps keep your name in front of people, in the event something develops at the target company. Equally important, if someone asks your contacts if they know anyone who may be interested in a position, your name could very well be the one they suggest. What do you do with the information your target provides? ACT UPON IT! Write to the individuals or companies recommended to you. In other words, the process starts over again.