

Tech Tips: As More Work Goes Virtual, Networking Still Matters: Tips for Becoming a Virtual Networking Superstar

by Carolyn Aberman

Networking Is Good for You

A lot has changed in the last few years, but one thing still remains true: networking is beneficial for almost everyone. You may not know that 85% of jobs are filled through networking and 80% of working professionals think of networking as an important part of their jobs. Networking can help with many aspects of your personal and professional life, like helping you find a new position, assisting with business development, giving insight into the latest industry trends, and even improving your overall life satisfaction.

Brave New World

The pandemic significantly disrupted the traditional experiences of networking. With a growing remote workforce, networking has likely permanently changed. But even during quarantine, networking never fully went away, and its importance has not diminished. There is no time like the present to learn how to become a strong virtual networker.

While the changes ushered in by 2020 were rough in many ways, many people found a benefit in the forced break from multiple time consuming personal and professional obligations. Now, things look and feel different and networking opportunities are fewer and farther between. We are all navigating this new climate, one that includes the uncertainty about large in-person events and the possibility of renewed social distancing and mask mandates.

Great Time to Start or Retool

If you haven't been an active networker, this is a great time to get started. Most networking experiences have been revamped in response to the pandemic, so regardless of whether you have been an active networker in the past, now is a great time to think about what your goals are for growing your network.

Often people don't engage in networking opportunities because they think of networking as a lever to achieve a specific goal. If they don't need a new job or don't do business development, they don't see a benefit to networking. Further, some get impatient with the practice of networking, thinking that results will be immediate. When embarking on any networking plan, whether intermittent or very ambitious, know that results take time and consistency of effort. Having a solid idea of what you want to achieve through your networking efforts will lead to a better experience overall. And, by establishing up front what your endgame or goal is, you can make sure to target your efforts in the right direction.

Maybe you're new to networking and you want to start small. Set an achievable goal—maybe even just to meet one new person. Then you can revisit and retool as you build your confidence. Your plan might be more focused on getting five new email addresses, or ten new LinkedIn contacts. If your goal is just to meet more people, then you may set a target of attending one event a month and accept invitations that seem interesting or where you know someone. However, if your goal is finding a new job or clients in a certain industry, you may want to seek out events that cater to professionals in that segment. Whatever your goals, this is an opportunity to be very purposeful. Regardless of where you're starting, understand what you're hoping to accomplish and set some specific goals to measure your progress over time.

The other side of making networking effective is to make preparation and follow-through a part of your networking plan. Before attending an event, if you have access to an attendee list ahead of time, check out their LinkedIn or website profiles and search for publicly available information before the meeting. Identify whom you want to meet and try to plan a way to cross their path. After the event, take things a step further by setting a new goal to communicate with them through email, LinkedIn, or even requesting a virtual call in the weeks or months following. It's rare that you will meet someone at an event and get an immediate benefit (although not impossible). By establishing a regular cadence with someone though, there's a greater likelihood your network will be able to assist when asked.

Everyone forges their own unique path. There's no right or wrong way to network, but there is no reason not to add networking to your schedule.

Networking Can Be Fun

Many people have an idea that networking is intimidating or that only certain people can benefit. People can be turned off by the idea of networking because they equate it to cold calling. They worry it's awkward, and you either have a knack for it or you don't.

Despite the clear benefits of networking, research suggests some still find it intimidating and one in four professionals say they "don't network at all." The reality is that networking is just one way of meeting new people. And people who are attending networking events have self-selected as being open to forging new connections. Once you make the mental shift to the idea that your goal is just to meet someone, and hopefully find ways that you can help them and potentially they can help you, hopefully you can attend events and introduce yourself to new people without the stress that comes from setting lofty business goals.

Virtual Events May Be Less Intimidating Than In-Person Ones

If in-person events used to intimidate you, this is a great time to set a fresh goal and dive in. Virtual events have, in many ways, changed the networking game. Walking up to someone at the coffee station can be an intimidating experience. But virtually, you might feel more comfortable. You will attend the event from an environment of your choice—maybe at home, a familiar coffee shop or your office. You might be more comfortable coming out of your shell behind a keyboard.

Additional Thoughts on Maximizing Your Virtual Networking Game

Once you have your confidence up, a goal in mind, and maybe even a little bit of experience under your belt, here are a few tips for upping your game:

- 1. Understand what types of virtual networking events are available.** Some things I've seen are breakfast, lunch, and cocktail events. There are also virtual conferences using a host of virtual platforms that offer services, including the opportunity to be randomly assigned someone to network with. Many meetings that used to be in-person are being hosted on WebEx, Zoom, Teams and other platforms. Also, some online events are creative and may include group participation in video games or virtual sessions where participants can share their thoughts simultaneously by populating a slide or answering a poll in real time.
- 2. Understand the networking event format and opportunities for networking.** Once you've learned about events and registered, know the agenda of the virtual conference. Are there breakout sessions? If so, make sure you take advantage of them. Don't leave once the keynote is over, but rather stay and mingle with the crowd.
- 3. Engage with other event participants. Every time I've attended an online development event or conference, I** always engage in the chat feature if it's available. Make sure your Zoom or Google name/handle is your full name so that people can find you online or on LinkedIn. Jot down the names of people who are participating and reach out to them when the event is over. If there's a call for introductions or you are asked to populate the Chat with contact information, don't just share your name, but also provide your name and email as well as your LinkedIn URL.
- 4. Be prepared to be patient. Growing your network takes time; networking is a long game.** So, manage your expectations, and don't expect that one event is going to grow your network exponentially. Keep looking for events and opportunities and keep signing up for new conferences or experiences. And don't forget to keep the lines of communication open with the connections you make along the way.

Networking can be a positive experience; it can even be fun. It can be a great way to connect or reconnect with friends and colleagues. And if you enjoy being of service to others, networking is a two-way street and a great way to help others.

Go Forth and Prosper

I understand it can be hard to put yourself out there. But the positive benefits of networking—socializing and improving your career—far outweigh those jitters. And as much as I would like to resume in-person networking experiences, virtual

networking isn't going anywhere anytime soon. The more you can brush up on your virtual networking skills, the better off you'll be— whether you're looking for a new job, growing your business, or just developing a new skill—networking really is for everyone.

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