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30 Oct 2017 05:38AM
(Updated: 30 Oct 2017 09:54AM)



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Commentary: Networking is a necessary skill, not a dirty word

Many young adults and graduating students shy away from networking because it “feels fake”. But the rewards of networking far outweigh the challenges, says the National University of Singapore’s Centre for Future-ready Graduates career advisor Lynelle Seow.



A job seeker talks with a corporate recruiter at a job fair. (File photo: REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst)

SINGAPORE: As Halloween approaches and within the context of all things scary, there is a word that is guaranteed to strike fear in the hearts of even the toughest of students: Networking.

Almost every young adult that I have spoken to as a career coach has shuddered at its mere mention, usually embedded innocuously within broader advice on strategies for a successful career. The dismay reflects a great distaste that comes with seeing networking as inauthentic, exploitive and fake.

Students either steel themselves for the process or decide not to attempt it altogether because many conclude that “it’s just not me”.

Herein lies the fallacy. The fact is, networking is important and impactful.

The rewards far outweigh the goosebumps. Studies have validated that building and nurturing professional relationships do lead to more career opportunities, wider knowledge and faster job advancement. For a fresh graduate, it is also crucial in building professional confidence.

But how does a student overcome the aversion to networking? People have two main things they tell themselves about networking that contributes to a sense of fear.

I AM NOT BORN WITH IT. I AM AN
INTROVERT.

Many of us think that only extroverts can be good at networking because they naturally like to socialise. If you believe you are an introvert, you could easily and comfortably conclude that it is not an effort you should invest in because it runs counter to your shy nature.

But according to Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck, believing that capacities are inborn affects how much effort people are willing to put into learning things that do not come naturally to them.

She calls this having a “fixed mindset”. Instead she advocates having a “growth mindset”, which changes the frame from “having innate talent” to “learning skills over time”.

In this context, if you believe that networking is a skill that you might not have an inkling of at first but can develop, like learning a language, you will likely be motivated to work at it until you become competent.

NOTHING VALUABLE TO GIVE

Then there are those who brush off networking because they see it as fake and against their personal values. In this context, a huge number also shy away from networking because they feel they have nothing valuable to give to make it an equitable exchange.

According to Allan Cohen and David Bradford, authors of the book *Influence with Authority*, most people think too narrowly in terms of what they can tangibly give, such as strong personal connections or deep expertise.

“ For fresh graduates, this lack is often amplified.”

On the contrary, students already have in their possession valuable trades from their generational advantage, such as fresh perspectives on issues, from the technological viewpoint as well as insights on the millennial mindset.

When you recognise the value in this knowledge, the focus shifts towards reciprocal learning, which allows relationships to form more naturally. Networking becomes less propitiating.

A SKILL THAT CAN BE LEARNT

The best way to learn how to network is to move beyond the realm of thinking to the realm of action. In the words your mother told you, practice makes perfect.

There are an almost limitless number of places to network at. For students, seeking out and attending alumni events organised by your university is a non-threatening way to practise the skill while learning from the experiences of your seniors, who are usually open and generous with their thoughts and time.

Joining a club, organisation or other groups where you can meet people with shared interests is another less threatening avenue because of common ground.

“ Whatever the avenue, the key is to put yourself out there and take the leap.”

Here's five tips to help you approach networking:

1. START WITH THE RIGHT MINDSET

Approach others with a focus on learning. Redirecting your feelings of awkwardness towards curiosity and growth makes it easier to approach others to start a conversation.

2. BE PREPARED

Luck favours the prepared. You get the best outcome when you plan what you would like to achieve.

Having a target number of people to connect with can be a goal to propel you to make full use of your time.

Alternatively, your objective could be getting to know more about an industry or career in which you are interested.

An elevator pitch with a 30-second spiel about yourself may help to open the conversation. Preparing questions to discuss or reading up on relevant topics before the event allows you to contribute to the discussion and keep it flowing.

3. DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS, NOT CONTACTS

Networking gets a bad rep partly because of people who hand out business cards like a card dealer in a casino. Relationships, not sheer volume of contacts, should be the underlying focus.

“ People respond to a meaningful connection, not a business card shoved into their hands during a 10-second conversation.”

Focus on the quality of encounters rather than the quantity.

4. FOCUS ON GIVING RATHER THAN TAKING

Being generous with your time, insight, and genuine offers to help are always good ways to begin relationships, or at least to be remembered well. If a person associates your name with warm feelings, he or she is more likely to want to engage you in the future.

5. BE CONFIDENT YET HUMBLE

Balancing what appears to be two extremes is key. Being confident in yourself is about being authentic and genuine, which are important elements to building good relationships and trust.

Yet, confidence in holding your own should be accompanied with the acknowledgement of the limits of your understanding and experience.

Networking has immense social and professional value and can open doors to opportunity. But you cannot reap its benefits from the couch or the dark lonely corner of a conference hall.

Like Halloween, you have to step through the door and face your ghouls.

Scary? Yes, but think about it – who doesn't return home from Halloween with a bag full of candy and a fistful of rewards?

Lynelle Seow is the career advisor at the National University of Singapore's [Centre for Future-ready Graduates](#), a centre that develops programmes to equip NUS students and working professionals with skills for successful future careers.

Source: CNA/si