

How to Build a Network with Civilian Contacts

In our next installment of VFW Transition Tuesday, we discuss networking tips

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Does the topic of networking leave a sour taste in your mouth? Are you worried that I'm going to promote "schmoozing," and handing out business cards like a snake oil salesman?

If it does, you're not alone. But don't worry. Networking is an important part of your military to civilian transition, and if done correctly, is genuine, fun, interesting and rewarding – not at all slimy and disingenuous.

Why Does Networking Matter?

Maybe you've heard it said: *It's not what you know, but who you know, that matters.* Having a robust and trustworthy network of contacts is a significant part of keeping, and finding a better job. Some of the many ways building a robust network can serve you as you transition from a military to civilian career include:

1. Networking provides access. Having a healthy network of contacts gives you access to people and opportunities. Your network will sell for you when you're not in the room. They can advocate for you and endorse your skills, talents and goals to others who may be looking for someone with your abilities and character traits.
2. It can build on itself. The civilian world is relationship-based. How people feel about you influences their willingness to help you. Your network of contacts can keep you grounded by encouraging you to focus on the mission (growing your career) and building new relationships along the way by introducing you to other key people in your field.
3. Networking provides valuable insight. It's not enough to be good at your job, you must understand the human side of doing business. Your network will share insights into the human aspects of moving through your career, building credibility, and advancing

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your personal brand at your work.

4. It generates opportunity. Recruiters use networking to find candidates. Would you rather send in an online job application or have someone in your network hand deliver it to a recruiter? Which do you think gets noticed more?
5. It's fun! Walking into a meeting, social gathering, or event where you see familiar faces is less daunting. As you build a network, some of those relationships will turn into friendships, and others will become strong professional relationships. Either way, it's great to know people in your own community, company and industry.

How Do You Build a Network?

If you think about your network as a set of contacts where you can each provide reciprocal benefit, then you also recognize that you already **have** a network! Each of us has family, friends, and people we associate with – personally and professionally (during your military service and afterwards). As you make the transition, you will focus your professional network on those contacts you specifically approach, and maintain contact with for mutual gain. Networks are win-win relationships based on rapport, trust and common interests or goals.

The people in your network should fall into three categories: decision makers, information sources, and cheerleaders. Each category serves to support, inform, inspire, and promote you in your new career.

Decision makers are contacts who can provide you direct leads, job opportunities, or connect you to others who can. For example, these might be hiring managers, procurement personnel, clients, customers, and agents who can transact with and buy from you.

Information sources can offer you valuable insight into companies, industries, trends and people about whom you need to know. For example, someone with a deep knowledge of social media marketing can be helpful as you position yourself for a new job or a promotion. Ask about the companies where your friends are working. Do some research to ask insightful questions if you think the company may be one you would pursue.

Cheerleaders are contacts who provide support and encouragement. This might be a friend from your past, or a colleague at your current job. Your cheerleaders can also be great sources of information, and can stay upbeat and optimistic for you in times of stress. When your network has all three categories of people, you have access, insight, and support to build a successful career.

Networking Success Tips

Every person you meet could be a good networking contact. They might be in a position to hire you, could know some amazing information, or could be really encouraging. As you get to know civilians and veterans while building your network, remember these tips for success:

- *Reciprocation is important.* If you ask for more than you give, you are selling, not networking. Every time you ask for something, (i.e., introduction to a job lead), return with something of greater perceived value (i.e., returned lead or hand-written note of gratitude).
- *You can be a valuable resource to them, too.* Find ways to help your contacts. Be seen as a resourceful person who is connected to people and information.
- *Learn their business, and be sure they know what you are looking for.* Let your contacts know how they can help you. It is always easier to help someone if they are clear about what they need.
- *Stay genuine.* When you are genuine, people want to get to know you and help you.

As part of your networking, you will connect in person and online (on LinkedIn, for instance). Be sure to stay in touch. Occasionally ask how they are, and let your network know how you're doing, what you're up to and what you might have to offer. This makes you more relatable.

With time and practice, networking will become second nature. Through it all, have fun and remember to stay humble. If you don't know what you can offer in return, ask! Good with computers or handy work? Ask what they might need. Show your gratitude by letting them know how much you appreciate their support, and offering something in return. The give-back will be just as rewarding as the gain!

Developed through the VFW's collaboration with Lida Citroën of the international brand strategy firm LIDA360, this article is part of the VFW's expanding education and transitioning services, resources and webinars designed to provide service members and veterans transitioning to the civilian workforce with an opportunity to learn about personal branding and strategies for navigating the job search process. To learn more about Lida's commitment to the veteran community, [check out her recent TEDX talk.](#)

Join us for our free webinar with Lida on January 9, 2018, at 2 p.m. CST on Driving the Interview. [Register today.](#)

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