

'Networking' is Not a Dirty Word

Your network buys you brand capital

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Do you associate the concept of networking with kissing up, lying or not being authentic?

The concept of networking is often seen as distasteful by veterans. During your military career, it was important to build relationships and credibility with influencers and stakeholders, but you might believe you did it naturally, not in a forced or strategic manner. In the civilian world, networking is a huge career catalyst. Nurturing current relationships with people that will vouch for you and support you become a network to help advance your current position.

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As you transition to a civilian career, broaden your perspective of networking— online and in person – to build strategic relationships with colleagues, influencers, and contacts who can grow your career in meaningful ways.

What is Networking?

Networking is a mutually beneficial, reciprocal business relationship. In a networking situation, both people must perceive some benefit from the relationship, but the benefit does not need to be the exact same thing. Consider this example: John and Tim are sales professionals at different firms, and are networking contacts. They frequently see each other at business events, seminars, and conferences. John values Tim's insights into industry trends and his mentorship as John grows his career. Tim values John's feedback on his own sales style and communication skills, which is something Tim is working on. They each benefit from the relationship.

When you network with someone, you commit to sharing knowledge, support, and

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resources. Relationships take time to develop to a comfortable level of trust. At the outset of a new networking relationship, contacts might simply exchange pleasantries, connect online, and initiate a meeting to learn more about how each party can help and benefit from the relationship. Later, as they learn more about each other, the parties might share more confidential information.

Networking Basics

To get started building your professional network, consider these steps:

1. Categorize your contacts

As you leave the military, you might feel you don't know anyone. That's not true! Make a list of your contacts, including: the men and women with whom you served; alumni from high school, college, graduate school; colleagues and co-workers from current and past jobs; and people you've met at events, job fairs, and other gatherings, contacts you've met through your spouse, socially, or through any transition prep courses. This is the start of your network.

2. Identify who you should know

To build your next career, who are the people you should, or would like, to know? Are there industry leaders, experts or collaborators in careers who could help you get started? Who are the people who get mentioned in conversations as being influential? Are there mentors you'd like to work with? Make a list of people you believe would be helpful to you. Then, identify ways you could help them: Could you provide insight into the military culture? Do they need to know someone with your skills or expertise? Are there connections you could make for them?

3. Plan how you can introduce yourself

When you've identified a contact you should know, what is the best way to connect? Do you know someone who knows them? Are you connected somehow online? Do you attend the same industry events?

When you initiate contact – in person or on a social networking site – be sure to introduce yourself, clarify why you are reaching out to connect, and how you can help them.

4. Start with your elevator pitch

Your elevator pitch is how you answer the question, "what do you do?" Be sure you clearly

state what your job is (or what you seek), how you are unique (what makes you memorable?) and share an example of how you can help others. You might consider answering this way: I do “X” for “Y” to solve “Z”.

NOTE: To learn more about the elevator pitch and networking, [tune into our webinar on March 28!](#)

5. Don't take rejection personally

If the person you want to connect with does not return the favor, don't take it personally. If you introduce yourself to them at a business event and they seem disinterested there are a myriad of possible reasons (they might be waiting for someone, not in the mood to meet someone new, distracted from a bad day, etc.) Online, if the person rejects your invitation to connect, they might be too busy or distracted to pay attention to your offer. If they don't know you, how could they reject you personally? Consider this before you take it to heart.

Always be yourself when building a network of contacts. When you are genuine, people want to get to know you and help you. Then, act with generosity and curiosity, and you will make a positive impression on the people in the community in which you will work!

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.](#)

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