



Get an Unofficial Education With Career Networking

Learn the benefits of going beyond the handshake.

By Roy Harryman



For some, the term “networking” conjures up images of glad-handing goofballs passing out business cards at receptions in between trips to the punch bowl.

If that’s your definition, think again.

“That’s really the opposite,” explains John Kreiss, a management consultant and executive business coach at MorganSullivan in Northboro, Mass. “That’s how *not* to network.”

Rather than working a crowd, good networkers know how to develop and maintain relationships that help them succeed at work, as well as make solid career transitions.

“It’s really about building a community—in some cases a virtual community—that helps each other with career goals and career development issues,” clarifies Elizabeth McAloon, principal of The McAloon Group in New York City.

In the rapidly changing job market, it’s a skill no data center professional should be without.

Networking 101

Networking doesn’t begin at a cocktail party. Start within your own organization. From whom can you learn? You may be seeking technical knowledge, management skills or both. Make it a point to show genuine interest in people who can teach you something or help you connect with others.

“There is so much to be learned just by asking people what they do and how they like what they do and how they got their job,” suggests Irv Pfeiffer, owner and principal consultant of Irv C. Pfeiffer & Associates, Fort Myers, Fla., and Countryside, Ill. “When I leave a party, I’ve learned a great deal about others.”

Once the lines of communication are open, you can ask more probing questions that help you get the information you need to take your job performance to the next level (or the next company).

Don’t stop within your office. Stay in touch with former colleagues. And, if you have access to a local AFCOM chapter, you can take networking a step further and meet people from your metro area who are facing similar challenges.

“We feel it’s invaluable—the information we gather at those [chapter meetings],” shares Tim LaFollette, data center manager at Airline Tariff Publishing Company in Dulles, Va. “There’s a lot of networking that goes on; that is very vital to us.”

Successful networkers look to help others as well as themselves. They e-mail links to relevant articles, share job openings, and make it a point to thank someone who assists them.

“You’ve gotta give to get,” Pfeiffer says.



The Invisible Job Market

The Wall Street Journal reports that only five to 10 percent of jobs are publicly posted. The rest are filled from informal networks. Building these relationships is important, even if you love your job and never plan to leave.

"Things do happen," informs Kreiss. "It's good to create an insurance policy. It's putting you on a much stronger platform."

It's far better to build a network while you are happily employed, instead of as an act of desperation after you lose your job. In addition, networking may turn up opportunities you never considered before—even if you love your job.

"You should have a whole community available to you when you really want to change jobs," states McAloon. "Networking is not what you do when you get a pink slip. It's a lifelong community building experience."

Successful networking, even when looking for a job, is *not* passing out unsolicited resumes or asking people for work. That may force them to prematurely reject you because they don't know of an opening.

When it comes to job hunting, Pfeiffer says there are two kinds of networking: classic and targeted. Classic takes the shotgun approach, advertising to as many people as possible what you are looking for. Targeted networking is pursuing information and contacts about a job within a specific organization with laser-like precision. You fill in blanks piece by piece with the goal of getting to know the hiring manager.

"It's so targeted the odds of being successful are much higher than chasing leads through classic networking," he continues. "The best jobs are invisible, not in the hands of an executive search firm or Monster.com."

Finding Solutions on the Job

For LaFollette, networking is as close as his next AFCOM chapter meeting. Regardless of what challenge he is facing, someone at the meeting has already been there, done that.

"We get great answers from that," says La Follette, president of AFCOM'S Potomac Chapter. "Sometimes you may find somebody immediately. The overall communication at these functions is just excellent."

Doug Palmer, director of data center services for a St. Louis consulting firm, says his participation in a local AFCOM chapter leads to savvy purchasing decisions.

For example, he plans to call a friend at another company before considering a tape storage subsystem that a vendor pitched. The colleague is already using the product and will give a candid report about its functionality.

"I don't make many decisions on large acquisitions without consulting other people in the business," imparts Palmer, who is president of the St. Louis Gateway Chapter. "Another person who has already done it and has already seen the pitfalls can often save you a lot of time. AFCOM has made things a lot easier."

The St. Louis chapter meets quarterly for about half a day. Speakers and topics are carefully selected, but the learning is often informal.

"At chapter meetings, the socializing that occurs in between presentations can often be more beneficial than the presentations," he notes.



Palmer is also planning to attend the spring AFCOM Data Center World™ conference with two coworkers. He plans the event into his schedule nearly a year ahead of time to ensure he is free to go.

"It's probably the only major conference I take time to go to because it's just impossible to get away anymore," he conveys. "I can't imagine how you would do this job without having contacts on the outside."

From Good to Great

McAloon considers networking to be the equivalent of an unofficial education. It gives an advantage to employees with outside knowledge and contacts.

"These are the kinds of things that turn a good career into a great career," she comments. "You should always be aware of your relative marketability...so that you have a sense of 'Am I at the top of my game?' and 'Do I still have the most current skill sets?'"

McAloon encourages people to not only attend conferences, but to set up appointments beforehand. Make plans to stretch yourself and meet colleagues who seem out of your league.

In addition, consider what contributions you can make to your industry and trade association.

"Have your name known outside your immediate circle so you have credibility," she advises. "If you are an introvert, do some writing. If you are an extrovert, do some speaking."

You Can't Afford Not To

Data center workers have plenty of reasons to neglect networking. It's hard enough maintaining a 24-hour operation seven days a week. Who has time for that power lunch?

But experts say that's a mistake. Proactive scheduling can free up time that will yield big results for your career and employer. The benefits of networking are so immense that no career should be without them.

McAloon adds, "You don't have time not to."

Roy Harryman (roy@kansascityjournalist.com) is a freelance writer and former editor of DCM.