

# Is Traditional Networking Still Necessary?

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In many ways, Amazon.com's recent job fair looked like a typical event. Applicants lined up to network with recruiters in a well-lit room. Resumes were exchanged and follow-up interviews scheduled. But every now and then, someone would spontaneously float to the ceiling.

The job fair took place in the online world Second Life, and the participants were interacting in the form of avatars – virtual characters they manipulated through their computers. In spite of accidental levitation and other technical mishaps, virtual career events have become increasingly common. Along with resume blasters, online job boards and networking sites like LinkedIn and Facebook, they're another sign of the Internet's growing importance as a job hunting tool.

In fact, now that they can reach millions of employers with the click of a mouse, job seekers may wonder if offline networking is still necessary.

“Absolutely,” says Ford R. Myers, career expert and author of *Get the Job You Want, Even When No One's Hiring*. “There is no better way to make progress in your job search than to have personal connections with people in your network. If you send out things cold to a large group of people who you don't know, the response rate is so infinitesimally small that it's practically nonexistent. So answering ads online, sending out blind resumes to companies and applying for positions all day long on the Internet is a fool's game. It has no productivity, no response rate, and no success.”

Jason Alba, social media expert and CEO of jibberjobber.com, agrees that networking is key – but he believes it needs an online component. “Having a profile on LinkedIn is absolutely critical, because the people you need to be in front of - HR recruiters, hiring managers, business owners, decision makers - are using it to some degree,” he says. “If you're going into a niche profession or industry, you should also find the websites that are specific to it, and start getting involved there as much as you can. And you can start to make a name for yourself as an expert in your field by starting a blog that's centered around your profession.” Since blogs are updated regularly, he says, search engines rank them higher, and they're more likely to be seen by employers and recruiters.

But though the Internet offers many networking tools, Alba advises job seekers not to depend on it exclusively. “I discounted face-to-face networking for the first couple months of my job search, and it was a complete failure. I sent out as many resumes as I could, but I didn't get any interview requests because I was not able to establish any deep and meaningful relationships. So you might start making contacts online, but it makes sense for you to eventually go offline and actually meet people on a different level.”

According to Duncan Mathison, career counselor and co-author of *Unlock the Hidden Job Market*, the depth of your relationships with your contacts can make or break your network. “We have all heard that there is an average of ‘six degrees of separation’ between people,” he says. “But research shows that the vast majority of job search networks die after two degrees of separation – ‘a friend of a friend.’ This is because people in your network have to care enough about you and your search to make introductions to the next connection. And people will care more about you if you actually meet them - or at the very least have a phone conversation to establish who you are and what types of employers would value your skills the most.”

As Alba describes it, job fairs are just one of many places where you can make these connections. “Go to Chamber of Commerce meetings. There are technology councils or employer associations in most big cities – go to those. Go to business meetings and try to interact with people. But no matter where you do it, one of the key things with networking is the concept of following up. Put your contacts in one central place, where you record who you talked to, when you talked to them, and what you talked about. Go back to your contacts and try to drill down into their networks, to figure out who else you should be talking to. Let your connections know what you need, and ask them specifically, ‘Who do you know? Can you give me an introduction?’ Getting an introduction to somebody is far more powerful than doing a cold contact.”

Myers agrees, but he cautions that job seekers shouldn’t view networking merely as a pathway towards the boss or hiring manager. “The main reason to get a networking meeting is so you can find out what a company’s needs and challenges really are,” he says. “Your employer couldn’t care less about the fact that you’re unemployed. All they care about is what you can do for them, and networking is the perfect opportunity to find out what that is. So you’re looking for people who can lead you into organizations where there are potential problems and needs that are aligned with your own strengths and assets. You want them to be looking at you and thinking about where you can provide value, and then referring you on to the next level.

“Networking is all about getting warm referrals, communicating with the people with hiring power, seeing what they want, and finding ways to give it to them,” he says. “Uncover an employer’s needs, then show how you’ll successfully address those needs, and you’ll always have a job.”

## **QUIZ: Test Your Networking Skills**

Though the Internet can be a convenient tool in your job search, it can also become a crutch that lets you avoid personal encounters. These True/False questions will help you use on and offline networking effectively.

1. The most efficient way to job hunt online is to post your resume and respond to positions advertised on job boards.

FALSE: “One of job seekers’ biggest mistakes is that they’re sitting behind a computer sending out resumes to Monster.com and then passively waiting by the phone,” says Myers. “The percentage of my clients who find their jobs that way is less than one percent.” Instead, he says, you should use the Internet mainly to research companies and to arrange and conduct personal networking encounters.

2. You should resist the urge to write in informal texting style when networking online.

TRUE: Online communication should be concise, but that doesn’t mean “OMG R U hiring?? ;-)” is an appropriate networking message. “Sending emoticons or abbreviated writing right off the bat sends kind of a sloppy message,” Alba says. “And remember that in written communication, it’s hard to discern that someone is joking. So if you use humor, it’s really easy to screw up your intentions.”

3. The first thing you should ask in a networking meeting is “Do you know of any available jobs?”

FALSE: “People need to stop acting like job applicants, and start acting like solution providers,” Myers says. “It’s not about you. If you start by saying, ‘I need a job, I want more career growth, blah, blah, blah,’ you’ve got it completely backwards. What you should be talking about is what you can contribute to the employer, starting on day one.”

4. It’s important to control your online brand.

TRUE: Alba recommends that all job seekers Google their names, to see what other people can learn about them online. “If you find a Facebook profile or a Twitter tweet full of foul language or inappropriate conversation, is that the message you want to put in front of a prospective employer?” Fortunately, he says there’s a remedy for an embarrassing Internet history. “If it’s stuff like Facebook pictures, stuff you have control of, just take them down. But if it’s stuff you don’t have control of, start a professional blog, blog every single day, and make sure you put your name in the blog posts. Those posts will start appearing towards the top of the Google search results, and they’ll push the junk down.”

5. If you’re not comfortable interacting in face-to-face encounters, you should avoid them and stick to online networking.

FALSE: On the contrary, Mathison says, you should do even more face-to-face networking as practice. “These days, job interviews are hard to come by. When they do happen you need to be prepared. Networking conversations give you essential practice in describing who you are and what you do. With practice, you are less likely to say something stupid in a high-stakes job interview.”

6. If you network by email, it's more efficient to send general messages to multiple contacts instead of personal messages to individuals.

FALSE: "I have had clients who networked effectively through email, but it was very personalized, focused email, not big blast email campaigns," Myers says. "You can get good networking going through personal emails, referrals, warm leads and introductions. But when you do get a response, the first thing you say is, 'Can we get together and meet, or can we follow up with a phone call?'"

7. While networking, you should avoid specifying which type of job you're looking for, just in case an employer has a different position available.

FALSE: According to Mathison, "It is lame to 'put yourself out there' with some general and vague request that you are looking for a job with a stable employer, great benefits and plenty of growth opportunity. We're all looking for that job, and we will take it first before we pass it on to you! Be specific. Help your network help you. They need to know specifically the one or two types of jobs you are looking for, as well as the names of possible employers."

## SCORING

6 or 7 right: Your networking skills are solid – use them regularly and your job search will end well.

4 or 5 right: More knowledge could help – try reading some networking books, articles and websites.

3 or fewer right: Your networking skills need work – read books, seek guidance from a career coach or counselor, then get out there and start practicing.