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5 Job Search Situations Where Networking Is Not The Best Next Step

**Caroline Ceniza-Levine** Senior Contributor ⓘ

Careers

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Two professionals meeting over coffee GETTY

Networking is so helpful to a job search that one might assume it's the right next step in all situations. However, this is not the case, and trying to get a networking meeting rather than taking another, more appropriate action can even hurt your job search. Every impression counts. The questions you ask, the help you ask for and the information that you don't know all make an impression during your networking.

Here are five job search situations where networking is not the best next step – and what to do instead:

1 - You have no idea what you want

Sure, it's helpful to talk things out with other people, and that's true for getting ideas for your career. However, when you approach people as someone who doesn't know what they want, you appear undecided (commitment issue?), unsure (confidence problem?) or unprepared (laziness?). The other person might be willing to brainstorm with you, but they also might feel like it's too big a question to solve. How would they know what you should do with your life?

Don't network about anything too general. Have at least some idea of potential career moves, and use the meeting to test these specific ideas. Do research in advance about what your target careers would entail, and tailor your questions to how the other person can specifically help you. For example, if you are looking to switch industries and have narrowed down your possibilities to media and tech, reserve the media questions for your media connections and the tech questions for your tech connections. This way, you appear focused, prepared and respectful of their time.

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2 - The questions you have can be answered by basic research

I once heard from a graduate of my alma mater, who wanted to talk about her career change into management consulting. At the time, I had just pivoted my own career from management consulting to executive search but with a management consulting focus, so it made sense that this person

would want to speak with me. Since we had so much in common – same school, both career changers – I readily agreed. (Pointing out common affinities is an effective way to land networking meetings!) However, her opening question for me was to name the top companies in the field.

Don't ask questions that can be answered by basic research. Do that research in advance, and use the networking meetings to verify the information or get nuanced information. For example, had this alum let me know what she was seeing as the top competitors mentioned in the field and then asked if I agreed or asked if I would name different companies based on her interest in a specific sub-area, then I would have seen her as someone who had put in some work and was going the extra step. Instead, I felt used that she wanted to shortcut her research and just ask for the answers.

3 - The contact who offers to refer you to HR doesn't know you well

It is always helpful to get someone inside the company to pass on your resume for a job opening. However, it is less helpful when the person referring you doesn't know you at all. Therefore, if you have a networking meeting with someone at a company where there is an open job that you want, but you do not know that person well, I would not ask that person to submit your resume. If they offer to submit it, I would thank them profusely and I would possibly let them submit it later, but first I would ask for information (here are [eight better things to ask for than a generic introduction to HR](#)).

When a networking contact doesn't know you well, any referral they make on your behalf isn't going to be that strong. At best, it will be something like, "I have never worked with this person but we have a mutual friend who knows great people so this person must be great." Maybe, but now the recruiter or hiring manager has to believe that you're such a good judge of people that you have vetted that your friend can vet their friends – that's a long chain of trust. It may make the company give you a second glance, but

if the hiring team has any doubts, your tenuous networking contact won't be able to advocate for you and probably won't want to put themselves on the line. They may even have offered to submit your resume just to cut the meeting short and will be a lukewarm advocate at best.

4 - You reach a recruiter who doesn't hire for what you want

Yes, recruiters are great networking connections to have and not just for your immediate job search. Experienced recruiters have knowledge of their market, a broad perspective on career issues and a wide network. Recruiters are definitely on the top 10 list of [people you should have in your network](#).

However, many recruiters specialize in a specific industry or function, and if you are outside that area, then a recruiter's knowledge, feedback and network will be less relevant to you. If a recruiter is internal to a company, they will be most relevant about jobs specific to that company, and your networking efforts should be focused on multiple companies. Too many job seekers make reaching recruiters, any recruiters, a top priority. It's best to focus on hiring managers, who are the ultimate decision-makers, or recruiters in your target area. To reach these people, you need to have a background that clearly shows your value to them. If your resume, LinkedIn profile and responses to commonly asked questions don't yet make that value crystal-clear, focus on these supporting tools first before you squander a networking meeting.

5 - You reach a recruiter who hires for what you want – but you're a career changer

If you are a career changer, [recruiters are not helpful](#), even if they specialize in the area you want. I say that as a recruiter and a multiple-time career changer – I would never hire myself! A recruiter's job is to filter people out, not make an exception, and a career changer is always the exception. If you are a career changer and you have existing recruiter relationships from your former career, these recruiters may be even less helpful if they try to

convince you to stay where you are (after all, that's where they can place you).

It's always more effective to network with a hiring manager than with a recruiter, and for career changers this is even more important because it's the hiring manager that can make an exception. However, networking whether it's with the recruiter or the hiring manager is not the best move for a career changer, until you have something to talk about in your new career. If you don't have knowledge of your new area and some demonstrated results (it can be from volunteer work or consulting, not just another job), then talking to people, especially influential people like hiring managers and recruiters, is premature.

Networking is helpful only when you are prepared

I certainly don't want to discourage networking as part of your job search. People hire people, so it is critical that you connect with people and not just submit your resume to faceless job postings. That said, you want to make the right impression when you network. You want to appear focused, knowledgeable and prepared. The person you're networking with can refer you to be hired, if not hire you outright. You don't want to squander that opportunity for your job search.

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Caroline Ceniza-Levine

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I am longtime recruiter turned career coach and media expert on the job market. In addition to Forbes, I formerly wrote for Money, CNBC and Portfolio and have appeared as... **Read More**

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