

CULTIVATING CAREERS

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Networking Survival: Tips for Introverts

Can you relate to this scenario?

After putting on your best business casual clothes and grabbing a handful of business cards, you head out the door to a “networking event.” While in the car your mind is racing a bit with questions like, “I wonder who will be there? Will I say the right things? Will this be a waste of time? Is it too late to turn around?” As you pull into the parking lot you notice your slightly sweaty palms; you toss in a mint and take a deep breath. As you approach the room, the voice in your head says, “OK, you can do this.” You quickly scan the room of over 100 people, hoping to spot a familiar face you can find safe harbor with. But the whole goal of being there is to “network” and meet new people, so you say to yourself, “OK, it’s game on!”

This is my true-life scenario. Even though I am a successful career consultant and I coach professionals about networking every day, to the surprise of many I am an introvert. I can feel the same pain of my introverted clients who have this networking experience. Because networking is such a large component of job search, here are the tips I offer to master the art of networking in a way that works for my fellow introverts.

1. Don’t apologize or feel badly for being an introvert.

Recognize that it isn’t your natural tendency and that there are ways to effectively network within your style.

2. Understand that we can adapt our style when necessary.

Because business is anchored in relationships, it is important to learn how to adapt your style in a way that feels genuine yet is effective. Think of it this way: there will always be parts of our work we don’t like, yet we learn how to do them well to be successful. Once I came to that realization, I could step into any room full of strangers.

3. Play to your style.

Arrange to meet people in smaller groups and more intimate settings. It is much easier for us introverts to meet an individual over coffee and to network in smaller groups.

4. Evaluate and address the fears that prevent you from networking.

These range from fear of rejection to not knowing what to say to not wanting to impose. Uncover and address these factors so they don’t present ongoing barriers to networking.

5. Manage the head game of “no one will want to talk to me.”

Introverts are typically very good listeners; people in general feel good when they can talk about themselves.

6. Learn some basic conversation starters.

It is easy in job search because conversations typically revolve around what you do, where you used to work and what you want to do next.

7. Start networking with people who you know.

It's more comfortable to network with familiar faces. The fear of rejection is lessened.

8. Practice.

Even if you may not like it, start to sweat or feel your heart racing at just the idea of networking, practice. It reduces the physical symptoms. Trust me, the more you do it, the easier it gets.

Introverts unite! There is hope for you and lots of people — introvert and extrovert — to meet and make valuable connections.