

## Five Ways to Short-Circuit Your Professional Network

*By Robert Half International*

A network of industry professionals can be a tremendous resource for anyone in the workforce. People in your circle of contacts can provide job leads, offer valuable career advice and even become clients. However, just as computer networks need constant maintenance and appropriate action to work properly, so do professional networks.

If you don't manage your connections effectively, you can damage relationships. Here are five common mistakes to avoid:

- 1. Not staying in touch.** If the only time people hear from you is when you need something, they're unlikely to want to help. Networking requires regular attention. Show a sincere interest in your contacts by keeping the lines of communication open. Sending an interesting news article, offering a note of congratulations on a promotion or meeting for a quick lunch are just a few ways to achieve this goal.
- 2. Overusing connections.** You're searching for a new job as a systems administrator and someone in your network has given you three solid leads. She's such a great resource, you're tempted to ask her for additional referrals the following week. Don't. Most people are happy to help on occasion, but if you contact them repeatedly, they're likely to feel you didn't fully appreciate the initial assistance. Instead, broaden your efforts and tap others in your network.
- 3. Failing to say thanks.** If you've ever helped a colleague or given someone a present and received no "thank you" afterward, you know how disconcerting it can be. You may wonder whether the person appreciated what you offered at all. The same is true with networking activity. Regardless of how much work people put into your requests, it's

critical to always thank them for their efforts. A little gratitude can go a long way toward maintaining positive relationships.

4. **Being impersonal.** Think carefully before contacting those in your network. For instance, sending a generic, mass e-mail to people asking for opinions on a database application you're evaluating may generate little or no response. The communication may not reach people with the right knowledge, and recipients may falsely assume others who received the e-mail will reply. Instead, try customized, targeted messages. Also remember that contacts are more likely to assist you if you explain exactly what they can do for you: "I am researching potential database applications for our firm and recall that you implemented XYZ product last year. Can you share with me your experiences with this application? What type of feedback have you received from end users?"
5. **Not returning the favor.** Keep in mind that networking is a two-way street. You should be just as receptive to helping others as you want them to be for you. Whether a direct contact or a referral seeks your assistance, make an active effort to share your expertise, even if you can only offer suggestions of useful resources. Then follow up a week or two later to see if the information you provided was sufficient and whether you can offer any additional advice.

Networking should be a constant priority for any IT professional. Make sure you're taking the right approach with your contacts and nurturing existing relationships. You'll not only benefit from the immediate assistance you may receive, but you'll also ensure you have a valuable support system for any future career issues.

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