Networking Outside the Box
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Whether you are actively seeking employment like many paralegals today or laying the groundwork for an eventual job search once conditions improve, you need to follow similar steps. These include reviewing and updating your resume, lining up references and scanning job boards. But the most critical component in both preparing for and conducting a job search may be ramping up your networking efforts.

Now more than ever, you need to have an extensive web of contacts that can provide professional support, career advice, and leads to potential employment opportunities. If you’ve been too busy to tend to your network, it’s never too late to refresh ties with your existing contacts and establish new relationships. Here are some “outside-the-box” techniques.

Think Hyperlink. Professional networking is similar to surfing the Internet. Just as any given website features links to other online sources, each new contact you make represents more than just that one individual: Everyone has a professional network with which you can potentially connect. In the online realm, a good example of this type of connectivity is LinkedIn. When you add a contact, you can view all of their contacts and,
if appropriate, invite those individuals to join your network. In the person-to-person world, you usually don’t gain the same instant access to a contact’s Rolodex as you do in the online realm, but you can ask acquaintances about extended connections. For example, say you know an attorney who currently works in house but was previously at a law firm that is building up its bankruptcy practice, your specialty. You could ask your lawyer acquaintance for an introduction or referral, thereby creating a “hyperlink” to the legal administrator or hiring manager at that firm.

**Welcome to the Club.** Consider starting or joining a professional networking club. These groups comprise professionals from a variety of backgrounds – law, information technology, finance, real estate and marketing, for example – who meet regularly to exchange job leads, refer one another to potential clients, share news about business opportunities and expand their individual networks. In some clubs, the members take turns giving presentations about topics of interest, such as recruitment and retention strategies, business development or professional education. Other networking clubs require their members to bring someone new to each meeting. Whatever the specific structure of your club, make sure the members come from a variety of industries, rather than just one or two. This will allow everyone to forge new professional alliances without feeling like they’re competing with others in the same field.

**Be an SME.** If you have useful information that could help others do their jobs more efficiently or successfully, you could be a Subject Matter Expert (SME) for those in your network. Perhaps you recently attended a conference for paralegals where you picked up some fresh ideas and strategies. Or you may have just mastered a new case management program or created a better way to track the activities of litigation teams. By
sharing such knowledge or news with your contacts – through a blog, an article in a professional association’s newsletter or a presentation at a legal conference – you’re providing a value-added service and establishing yourself as someone worth seeking out for insights and information. In the process, you will add new contacts to your professional network. Later on, those you helped may put their expertise or professional connections to work for you.

**Become a Matchmaker.** You’ve probably noticed that some people seem to be born “connectors.” When you mention that you’re looking for a job, for example, they can immediately provide you with half a dozen prospective employers’ names and phone numbers. These people develop their knack for matchmaking by keeping an ear out for information that might interest their contacts. You can, too. For example, a legal administrator acquaintance of yours might tell you her firm is looking for a paralegal for a distant office. You may not be interested in a job change or relocation at this point in your career, but you know it would appeal to a former colleague of yours, so you call that person and share the relevant information. As the old saying goes, “what goes around comes around,” and one day in the future, that former supervisor may return the favor by giving you helpful advice or passing along a job lead.

By continually working to increase and deepen your coterie of contacts, you’ll create a rich base to draw upon whenever you need job leads, career advice, technical assistance or moral support. It will allow you to forge the kind of lasting, mutually beneficial relationships that are the hallmark of a strong professional network.

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