

Working Your CMA Network
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By

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Most professionals know that networking is important at every stage of a career yet even seasoned CMAs may neglect to make the most of their networking opportunities. Perhaps this is because networking is often regarded as a separate and auxiliary professional activity instead of as an integral – and absolutely essential – part of career development.

For more than fifteen years, Bob Edwards, career coach and former Senior Counselor with the outplacement firm of Drake, Beam, Morin in Chicago, IL has been assisting job candidates at all levels and in every industry to develop, use, and profit from professional networks. “Networking, is much more than just exchanging business cards and making superficial contacts,” Edwards explains. “It’s actually building personal relationships that could help you professionally in the future. And like all other human relationships, those in your network take time and effort to develop and grow.”

According to a study done by Lee, Hecht, Harrison, an international outplacement firm headquartered in Woodcliff Lake, New Jersey, networking accounts for at least 65% of all job hires. When the economy is slow, this number may be even higher because companies routinely seek to save recruiter fees by encouraging employee referrals. But whatever the economic climate, when you connect with a potential employer through a networking contact, that contact has, in effect, vouched for you. Consequently, the employer is much more likely to like and trust you before you’ve even met.

Networking starts close to home

Friends and family should always be considered as part of your professional network. Although your favorite aunt may not work in a doctor's office, she very likely could know someone who does. Since she likes you, she'll pass these good feelings about you on to others who may have a job that's just what you've been looking for.

But as a rule, the networking contacts that are most likely to lead to employment are people you work with now or have worked with in the past; fellow CMAs whom you connect with on a regular basis, and influential leaders in your field that you may have met at various events. "The most successful networkers," according to Bob Edwards, "are people who help others before asking for anything in return. The real power in a networking relationship automatically belongs to the 'giver' regardless of title or level of experience."

For CMAs, "giving" can take many forms. For example, you could share an article in *CMA Today* on a new technique that a non-AAMA member has recently asked you about. Or you might volunteer to help an office mate who seems especially busy. Or offer your business card to a student so they can contact you if they need any advise. In short, treat your colleagues the way you'd like to be treated.

Does all this sound familiar? Of course it does. Some people call it the "Golden Rule." A few years ago, author R. Fulghum turned his observations about this behavior into a bestseller on career management called, "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things." Like Fulghun, most of us already know and hopefully practice, this networking technique. But most of us don't connect it with a conscious effort to build our careers.

Networking begins in school

Like other good professional habits, networking should begin while you're still in school. Yet Phil Keckich, Senior Career Counselor with the career management firm of Scherer Schneider Paulick, Chicago, IL notes that all too often students neglect to take advantage of two obvious networking resources – their professors and classmates.

Faculty members can make all the difference to recent CMA grads looking for work. Not only do professors make ideal references for those applying for their first job, many employers contact schools to get a list of promising candidates for their office.

Joining a professional organization before graduation is a great way future CMAs can get ahead of the competition before leaving school. State President Sandra Willis, LPN, CMA from Valdosta, Georgia finds that, “Monthly attendance at AAMA meetings provides students and recent graduates with invaluable opportunities to meet future employers and colleagues. The earlier students become involved in the field they're entering, the more likely they are to succeed.”

Networking builds careers

Even after graduation, CMAs have to keep up with new techniques and discoveries that are changing the practice of medicine. Association meetings are the most efficient way to learn about innovative developments from the people who are using, and even creating, them. AAMA State President Anne S. Livernoche, CMA, Plainsfield, CT asserts “Monthly association meetings provide members with the opportunity not only to learn from prestigious guest speakers, but to meet them face-to-face.”

For AAMA State President Sara J. Baer, CMA, CPC of Trenton, IL organizational meetings also provide a forum where she can learn from her peers. “As CMAs, we each have our own area of expertise. Networking allows us to expand our skill sets by sharing information with each other both at meetings and on the job.”

To get the most benefit out of every AAMA meeting you attend make an effort to talk to at least one person you've never met before. Also take time to reconnect with people who've you seen at previous meetings and events. Finally, always thank the guest speaker for their talk and exchange business cards with them. (You may have to line up to do this but it's worth the wait.) Add their card to your networking file (see sidebar), write them a note telling them again how much you enjoyed their presentation and send it off with your business card. The note is, in it's own way a "gift" because everyone likes to be appreciated.

And remember, the more active you are in an organization like AAMA, the more you'll stand out to association guests, your networking peers and potential employers.

Networking increases public awareness of CMAs

There's another advantage to networking through the AAMA. The organization is very active in helping other medical professionals and the general public better understand the contribution that CMAs are making to health care today. As Illinois State President Baer sees it, "The larger our organization grows, the more power CMAs will have to raise the bar on our own professionalism and on how we're regarded in and treated by the medical community and general public."

Finally, when it comes to networking, leave no stone unturned. The more people you know and share a positive relationship with, the more likely you are to be successful now and in the future.

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Networking Tips

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- Create a networking file to hold the business cards of all your contacts. At the very least, keep these cards in one place. If someone doesn't have a card or you miss getting one from them, create one with their name, title, office address, phone number and e-mail address.

- Jot down where you met each of your networking contacts on the back of their cards and any other pertinent information about them. If you run out of space, attach their card to a file card large enough to hold your notes.

- Use e-mail or phone calls to touch base with a wide group of people on a regular basis. And make dates several times a month to have breakfast, lunch or just a cup of coffee with a core group of professional contacts you want to know better.

- Take advantage of the holiday season to send greeting cards to your network contacts. A thank you note is another opportunity to connect with someone whom has taken you out to lunch or perhaps helped you with a project. Send birthday cards and, even better, congratulations on professional success, as often as you can. All of these gestures create a bond between you and the people in your network.

- If your office doesn't provide you with business cards, make them up for yourself. Include your professional title, degrees, phone number and e-mail address. They make it much easier for everyone to keep track of *you* for *their* network.

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Wendy Lalli is a recognized authority on professional development who writes frequently for the Chicago Tribune and has a career advice column, "Dear Lalli," in the Daily Southtown. She facilitates group seminars for professional associations and outplacement agencies and also works with private clients in all industries from entry level to senior managers.

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