DIGITAL NETWORKING DURING COVID19

by Kathryn Douglas

While classes moved online this spring in response to the global COVID19 pandemic, many internships were cancelled or became remote opportunities, and the world of work has entered a period of uncertainty and transformation. Despite the disruption, employers are still recruiting, and networking for career advancement continues to be a viable and important tool for career success.

For those with time and access to digital platforms, now is a good time to check off all of the networking tools and resources available through your institutions and online platforms—I like to think of these as passive networking, as there is little or no back and forth with individuals in order to get set up and expand your networks by joining groups and signing up for resources. It is also a good time to continue the active process of building your professional network—something that can be achieved by making the most of remote platforms for virtual one on one meetings.

PASSIVE NETWORKING...

- LinkedIn connection request
  - Don’t belabor your note, but give context
  - If it’s an alumni of your program you are reaching out to, for example, simply state that you are “a student or alumna of x school, I’d like to connect.”
  - Once you are connected, you can follow up when ready, at any later date, with an email or LinkedIn note. The point, initially, is to build your network so it’s there when you need it, and in LinkedIn, a broader network helps you identify individuals in specific organizations
- Instagram or Twitter—the best way to increase your followership is to follow
- Join a LinkedIn interest group (or several)
- Join an alumni regional group or interest group
- Sign up for alumni databases or alumni connection tools
- Join professional associations with student rates
- Participate in free online webinars offered during COVID19 pandemic (build skills AND make connections)

ACTIVE NETWORKING

Before You Reach Out...

1. Plan what you would like to get out of the networking interaction. Now more than ever, thoughtful planning is going to yield better results in a digital networking environment. Before you reach out, be sure to know the what and why of your outreach. Are you looking for job or internship...
leads? Do you have a follow up question based on a topic covered during a webinar? Has an alumni or employer offered to be a resource or answer questions? Are you sending a cold email to ask for a brief conversation about a specific position?

2. Plan the how of your interaction. Just as you are likely having fatigue from screen time, excess downtime, and limited social activity, individuals you are reaching out to may well be feeling the same way. Be sure to think through the desired result of your interaction. And ask for it simply. ALWAYS defer to the preference of the individual to whom you are making an ask. It may seem obvious but is worth noting that it is important to keep in mind that everyone has different styles. Sometimes this is generation-based, sometimes it just is. On my work team, for instance, we do have a mix of styles and preferences based on a variety of factors including work from home “co-worker” arrangements, technology—Internet connections, hardware—comfort level with phone vs video, hours of “operation.” Some people are working hard to keep a 9-5 routine even when working from home. Some are working between children’s naps and may work into the night. Be sensitive, focus on business hours.

3. Prepare a two-to-three word sentence description of yourself to include unique career or academic interests. This will be in addition to your basic “name/degree/hello.” Write out a few items based on each of the below points. Once you have completed this step, go back to each one and edit down to one to two concise sentences or points. Decide upon an order that makes sense for a general introduction and be prepared to adjust according to context. You don’t need to include all items, although #1 is highly recommended. Include:

- How you are adjusting/adapting to the current climate during a global pandemic—this is an important part of your story right now, and is a way for you to show your adaptability, resolve, creative problem-solving ability, emotional maturity, and critical thinking skills. It is okay to be vulnerable, but you might not want to lead with this. Think about new skills you may be learning, how you might be helping family or community, and ways you have managed other sudden changes such as your academic program moving online
- What you are focusing on currently—a specific project/research topic/recent course
- Why have you chosen your course of study?
- Who you are working with—faculty, peers, campus partners, authors, role models and thought leaders who influence you
- A highlight of your individual story—this might be where you are from, an event you are planning, your language or technical skills, internship experience you have, a relevant transformative life event, the campus job you have

4. Be sure to review the LinkedIn profile and any information available online about the individual you will be meeting with. This includes publications, blogs, employer website bios, and social media.

*Reaching Out...*

Make your request very brief and specific, stating:
- Your name, degree, school, focus
• Something about them you are interested in if possible (the work they are doing in x field, the article they just published)

• Why you are reaching out to them, specifically (i.e. questions about a position you are thinking about applying for, interested in the work they are doing on x project, advice about navigating the company—refer to your initial plan for the outreach)

• What you want (typically a 15-20 minute phone or zoom conversation)

• How you would like to follow up, with contact information

**During a Digital Meeting...**

• Arrive early

• Look into the camera on your phone or computer. The natural inclination is to look at the individual’s face, but if you look at the camera, you will have the appearance of eye contact.

• Always use your video function—test your video and audio in advance.

• Begin with an enthusiastic greeting and thank the individual for agreeing to “meet.” Be sure to use their first name and make a comment/remark about them or their work. SAVE your two-to-three sentences about yourself for later in the exchange, or when asked.

• Use and repeat the individual’s name during your conversation.

• Ask questions—You have asked for a meeting because you have questions about a company or a position, or you have requested an informational interview to learn about an individual’s career path. Be sure you have a succinct list of prepared questions. Pay careful attention, smile, show enthusiasm, and display active listening by nodding, agreeing, or asking follow-up questions when the individual speaks. It is especially important during virtual meetings to be responsive and err on the side of overcommunicating.

• When asked what you do, or what you are studying, provide a two-to-three sentence answer based on your prepared response. Or, use your prepared notes about you during the conversation when relevant. This doesn’t have to be delivered in a block. It’s okay to go into more detail depending on the context of the conversation—if you end up talking about a project, for example.

• Watch the clock, and end on time. The onus is on you to be the timekeeper. If your guest is willing to speak a little longer, that’s fine. But be sure to note the time and mention that you want to be respectful of their time.

• Follow Up. Always send a thank-you note after someone has taken the time to meet with you by phone or virtually, regardless of next steps or the outcome of the meeting. If there are specific next steps based on the meeting, be sure to follow up in a timely manner.

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