

Networking can be thorny for the interviewer

There's a little-appreciated side to the informational interview, where job seekers ask industry insiders for the straight dope.

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Informational interviews are huge these days.

That's when job hunters ask industry insiders for information on a company or an industry -- emphatically *not* asking for jobs, but of course hoping that one contact will know another who'll know another who's looking to hire.

How-to books and websites are full of dos and don'ts for the hunters.

But there's not much help for the insiders, who have to balance their instinct to be helpful with some real risks to themselves -- the worst being a toxic referral to a valued colleague.

So, a few old hands agreed to share what they've learned over the years.

Keep accepting the requests to meet, they all said, if only because the best and the brightest will be among the callers, and you'll be glad to be part of their networks one day.

But you don't owe them a career-counseling session if they come to you absolutely clueless, they said. You don't have to give them another contact if you're not impressed. And on the flip side, don't let yourself get overinvolved in their job search -- even with the best of intentions.

Most old hands had a story about a referral they regretted.

"I once called a friend of mine and said, 'I met a candidate I think you might like to talk to,' " said George Blomgren, a career adviser and blogger in Milwaukee.

"I spent a little of my own coin doing that, and then the guy didn't even show up for their interview."

His solution: "I make a job candidate really work for it before I extend myself," he said. "I tell them to give me some time to think of names, and to call me the next week. Then I know if they're even going to follow up with me -- and as often as not they don't. It just amazes me."

Phil Schechter, who does career counseling for a living, actually takes some career-goal worksheets when he's called for informational interviews.

And he has already done his screening.

"They may be complete strangers, and I need to get a feel of who they are, who they're working for, why they're looking," said Schechter, founder of Schechter & Associates in Eden Prairie. "I always ask for their résumé. I never consent up front to meet with them until I've done my research."

Be clear about special circumstances, advised Kathy Andrus, a managing principal in Edina for the Right Management outplacement firm.

"Sometimes I meet with a more junior person, a friend of a friend or the child of a friend," Andrus said. "If I ask a network connection of mine to meet with them, I'm going to be really clear that I'm asking as a favor to me, really, to give maybe 30 minutes helping them brainstorm about where else they might want to go."

One common complaint among the old hands: People call for information but come looking for a job.

Andrus said she answers with something like this: "I'm happy to share my knowledge of the industry. That is what I can do for you at this point, because I'm not aware of any opportunities."

Blomgren said companies should have a policy on networking -- although he doesn't know any that do -- because some insiders worry that their employers would disapprove of that use of their time.

In fact their employers could benefit: In a February survey of 2,000 U.S. workers, networking was the most common way they landed their jobs, including a third of the managers, according to the global recruitment firm Hudson.

A few more pieces of advice:

- Enforce your time limit without guilt. If you promise someone a 15-minute phone call, you can sign off after 15 minutes.
- It's easy to get too invested in helping a friend or relative in their job search. Take a step back.
- Be realistic but not harsh if your news is not great: your industry is in a slump, or the job hunter's qualifications are not a particularly good fit, for example.

What are your workplace issues? You can reach H.J. Cummins at [workandlife @startribune.com](mailto:workandlife@startribune.com). Please sign your e-mails; no names will appear in print without prior approval.