



BY RUSS JONES

INSIGHTS FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

Networking Strategies for the Holiday Party Season

If you are unemployed, don't wonder if you'll be asked awkward questions about your situation at holiday gatherings – you will.

During a lull in the conversation at a Holiday dinner you may hear, "Hey Charlie, how's the job search going?" The last thing you want to talk about is why you aren't working, but friends and family can't resist. They're curious and probably mean well, but unprepared, you stammer something like "fine" or "it's going." Now that the subject has come up, it won't go away. Your questioner now continues with, "But didn't you get laid off in, like August?" or "What's the outlook in this economy for older guys like you?"

Perhaps you have vowed not to expose yourself to this torture and aren't planning to socialize until after the New Year. Well, you can run, but you shouldn't hide. Over the next few weeks attending holiday events can be the best thing you can do for your job search.

Your sister may be inviting people from her company to her open house. They could be executives, staffing or human resources professionals. Well connected business people may be members of your church or syn-

agogue and planning to attend the potluck. Your neighbor might be inviting his golf buddy – a search firm recruiter – to his soiree. Each individual knows countless individuals and you never know who will lead you to needed information or critical referrals.

Your goal is simply to meet people and form social relationships. Whenever possible, don't discuss work, theirs or your lack of it. Second, anticipate the questions and develop a strategy for dealing with them.

Assume that those who ask about your job search are genuinely interested. If you assume those asking are well meaning, you'll have a positive attitude about them, which will be reflected in your answers. So let's return to "Hey, Charlie, how's the job search?" Your response should revolve around what you are looking for, not why you haven't found it:

"Sam, I'm glad you asked. It's going really well. At this point, it's important to me to find the right opportunity in a place where I really fit. Plenty of companies are hiring, and I could easily get a job, but I'm laying the groundwork to find the right position that will be rewarding on a deeper level."

"But you left XYZ Company in August.



How long is this going to take?"

"This type of thing is a process. I have made time for personal assessment and exploration of some new and different directions. I have a number of potential leads in the works, and I'm confident the right thing will come along. Your interest is great, though. Could I call you next week to discuss my situation? I would like your input."

Have business cards printed and ready to distribute so you won't be embarrassed when someone says, "I'll give you a call. May I have your card?" Your card should include your name, address, phone number and e-mail address. Doing simple things like this will save you unnecessary discomfort and make you more businesslike.

Assume now that you're at a party where you don't know anyone, so you likely won't have to deal with questions about your status. Your goal is to meet and chat with lots of people without seeming panicked, disgruntled or depressed. You want to appear friendly, calm and self-assured – in short, as someone who would "fit" the culture and values of a respected organization.

It goes without saying that you are your best advertisement. Pay attention to your grooming and attire at holiday parties. Don't smoke or drink alcohol excessively. You'll never be referred or recommended to anyone for anything if you're out of control.

People with good social skills will have an advantage. The best way to be interesting to others is to be interested in them. Ask plenty of questions, but do not under any cir-

cumstance ask what they do. As a friend once said, the answer to "What do you do?" is, "What do I do about what?" In a meeting with Gardner Heidrick, one of the founders of the search firm Heidrick & Struggles Inc., I was told, "The moment you ask someone what they do, they're going to turn around and ask what you do. And you may not want them to do that." Responses to this question revolve around societal status, and why go there if your objective is to begin a personal relationship?

Most people go to parties to relax, laugh and interact on a social level. They want to talk about things outside their jobs. So ask about their families, hobbies, spouses and anything else that relates to their lives before and after work. Here are some questions I use: "Tell me about your spouse." "How did you two meet?" "Where are you from?" "How did you come to move here?" and "What do you do when you aren't working?" Everyone wants to talk about themselves and if you can get them to do that, you have a shot at creating a conversation and a relationship with them.

Lastly, don't ever corner someone you've just met at a party for advice. People don't want to be put on the spot, and it's likely they want to mingle, not engage in a strategy session with you. Further, you want them to know that you value and respect their time. If you want to talk to them in more detail say, "I'd like to get your thoughts on my situation. Would it be okay if I call you next week?" If someone said this to me at a party, I'd make time for them.

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