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Social Media Tops the List of Networking Preferences

By Charles A. Volkert, Esq.

Charles A. Volkert is executive director of Robert Half Legal, a leading staffing service specializing in the placement of attorneys, paralegals, legal administrators and other legal professionals with law firms and corporate legal departments. The company also provides managed review and e-discovery services. Based in Menlo Park, Calif., Robert Half Legal has offices in major North American and international markets.

In today's digital world, it may not come as a surprise that social media seems to have become the professional's preferred means of networking. But even if social media is the networking tool of choice, interactions appear to be driven by more than mere social reasons. Almost half (45 percent) of senior-level executives interviewed for a Robert Half survey said they prefer to cultivate business relationships via sites such as LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook over other options. One-quarter of respondents indicated they favored in-person networking at events, meetings and conferences. A slightly smaller number (22 percent) said they prefer to network through email correspondence.

The majority of professionals (60 percent) said their primary purpose for networking with professional acquaintances is to grow business. Twenty percent said their business-related networking is geared toward following industry news or finding a job (10 percent).

Networking can, of course, be beneficial to both organizations and individuals. It can help companies gain visibility and gauge new business opportunities. On a personal level, it can help professionals build their reputation in their field.

As effective as online networking is in reaching a large number of contacts, it shouldn't entirely replace more traditional approaches. Because most people still want some personal familiarity with individuals before doing business with them or making a referral, in-person interactions remain essential for developing meaningful professional relationships. Links built online can be viewed as breaking the ice, or kicking off this process, or, in reverse, a way to stay in touch with people you've already met in person.

In addition to combining online and in-person approaches, legal professionals may want to consider the following tips to get the most out of their networking experiences:

Don't wait until you need something. If you reach out to your network only when you need help, you'll be seen more as opportunistic than sincere. Be visible and keep in touch on a regular basis by commenting on your contacts' updates, offering assistance and sharing information.

Stay in the know. Monitor social media to stay abreast of the latest industry developments and your network's reaction to them. The information you gather from active discussions and shared perspectives is often more useful than what you can learn from more traditional media sources.

Mind your digital etiquette. Be especially aware of your tone when using social media and how your comments may be perceived in the online world. Remember that just because you're buffered by technology,

you’re not anonymous. What is intended as dry humor could easily be mistaken for sarcasm, and a tendency to weigh in on every issue might cause you to come across as a know-it-all. Always be professional, respectful and discreet when commenting on professional discussion boards and networking sites. A good rule of thumb: Don’t say something online that you wouldn’t say in person.

Strike the right balance. Connecting in person takes more time and effort than connecting online, but can deliver much more value over the long term. Develop relationships through one-on-one meetings and interactions with others at professional events and conferences. You can then use online networking to nurture these connections.

Even though online networking provides a highly efficient way to cultivate and maintain business contacts, it’s not a substitute for personal interaction with other professionals. Developing a strong network and a positive reputation still hinges on the quality of one’s relationships, and face-to-face meetings can build rapport in a way that electronic communication cannot. Continue to make time for tried-and-true networking methods such as get-togethers over coffee or lunch, mingling at professional events and personalized outreach to key contacts and prospective employers.

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