

Grouping for Job Search Support in Today's Down Economy

Networking groups have been around for over a hundred years. Rotary Clubs began in the early 1900's. Women's Clubs formed during the late 1800s. While the primary goal of such groups was service to others, you can be sure that relationships formed benefited everyone involved.

So what's new? Due to the economic calamity unfolding since last year (2008), with huge job losses and downsizings, the primary goal of networking has become finding a job and helping others find a job. This has created an interesting surge in micro-groups: small, local, often church-based groups, started in many cases by people who are themselves looking for work, staffed by committed volunteers, operating on tiny or zero budgets, but with hearts overflowing with concern for others.

We are part of this movement. We are members of such groups. (See our brief bios at the end of this article)

Knowing that many of these groups are quite young, and knowing that many more job support groups, from small to large, are about to pop up like mushrooms, we gathered together the following wisdom. Think of this as a set of guidelines we hope will be helpful to you when you join, or start, a local support group. Let us know if this helps you. Our contact info is at the end.

GUIDELINES TO CREATE JOB SEARCH SUPPORT GROUPS

Purpose

First things first, right? Why do you want to form yet another job search support group? We are NOT trying to talk you out of it. Rather, we want you to think first, then decide.

Types of Groups

Surveying the many groups that are out there, we have identified several "types," and offer the following as a way to think about your purpose.

Networking Groups: The primary focus is networking, i.e., providing gatherings designed for connecting with other people for the purpose of expanding your network.

Job Leads Groups: The primary focus is sharing job leads, typically around a specific industry sector such as HR.

Accountability Groups: The primary focus is mutual support of the members through weekly reporting on progress.

Job Search Skills Groups: The primary focus is training and reinforcement on the essential skills needed for an effective job hunt, including writing a resume, writing cover letters, preparing for interviews, building a network, etc.

In reality, many groups are blends of the above types

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Some Points About Groups

Bringing people together for a support group during a job search can reduce the stress and feelings of isolation that come with being "in transition." In some cases, being part of a group actually helps to make job search a positive experience. In the best of circumstances, new friendships are forged.

But, before we go further, there are some things to keep in mind about groups. Anytime a group comes together around a common goal, you get "group dynamics." In other words, there are some very predictable forms of human behavior that occur in groups. Here are a few of special relevance to the early stage of group formation.

What's Going On Here? – Have you ever been in a small group and suddenly people are asking questions like, "Who put her in charge?" "I didn't agree to that. How did that happen?" "Every meeting he's talking about everything except what's important." "Would you please get him to stay on topic?"

How Do I Fit In? - When new to a group, we are figuring out if we fit. Once we decide we fit, our attention turns to concerns about leadership, decision-making, distribution of power, procedures. You're thinking, "Am I comfortable with my level of power, responsibility and influence?"

Can I Be 'Me' Here? - Once fit and compatibility are 'settled' the question is, How open do I want to be in this group? Shall I be open and express my feelings or shall I keep my relationships superficial and task-oriented? Can I find a comfortable middle ground?

Who's In Charge? - There is an inclination for small groups to come together without a leader thinking that equal participation and responsibility is appropriate for a group of accomplished professionals. However, a leader can provide direction and focus to support the group's purpose and mission. Setting a caring, positive tone goes a long way to contain anxiety common to those in search. Along with providing direction and setting the tone a group benefits from a leader with a strong commitment to the sustainability of the group. This will minimize stress in the group and increase the likelihood of successful landings for each group member.

How Much Am I Willing to Commit To This Group? – Because this group is a volunteer activity, each group member is thinking some variation of the commitment question. The success of the group hinges on the commitment of the members. A common question is, "Will I commit to attend every meeting?"

These questions, and others in the early phases of becoming a group, occur naturally even if you're not aware of it.

Our suggestion - Maintain balance between the Task (your goal) you have set for yourselves, with the Relationships (variables mentioned above). Both are going on simultaneously in the group. Both interact. Your group experience will be more enjoyable and successful when the relationships are strong and productive.

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CONSIDER THESE WHEN FORMING YOUR GROUP

Design Team

When thinking of starting a group, chances are you are collaborating with one or more friends or colleagues. Collectively, you all are the Design Team! Whether you realize it or not, you are designing the blueprint, so to speak, for an organization to become a successful support group that will help many people.

Mission

One of the first things to work out is your Mission: What do you want your group to do, and Who will you do it for?

Scope

After Mission, the most important early decision is about the boundaries around your group and its activities: What will you do and What will you NOT do. One common challenge is determining the boundary between sharing personal strains of being in transition while keeping focused on the task of finding a job. How will your group support the whole person?

Note about Mission and Scope: While these are among the earliest decisions you'll make, once made, both will continually evolve as members and experiences change.

Values

Another consideration when creating a group is to consider how you want the group members to interact. For example you may want to consider qualities such as listening, encouraging full participation, mutual respect for each others' time, respect for member's differences. The qualities you choose to encourage will make your group unique and will likely create the kind of group where people feel welcome and supported

Name Your Group

Agree on a name for the group that conveys the purpose of your group. This will support your outreach efforts and help to attract people with similar goals of your group who are more likely to fit in with the group.

Location

Another decision to tackle early on is: Where will your group be located? Will you have a home base? Will you float?

Online Component

In today's wired world, many groups also have an online component or meet exclusively online such as a Yahoo group where job leads are posted, as well as notices about events like job fairs, workshops, webinars, conferences, etc.

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Schedule

When will you meet? Will yours be a regular recurring meeting, e.g. every second Saturday morning?

Outreach

Depending on several variables: the size, type and longevity of your group; it may be important to have plans for outreach efforts. Consider outreach upfront as you clarify your purpose and mission.

Show Me the Money

Chances are if your group is like most others, you are operating with a zero budget. Still, ask yourselves, what kinds of things would you like to offer your future members? Might you want to offer coffee? Water? Bagels? In the future, would you want to invite a guest speaker? If you do, you might want to give them an honorarium of some modest amount.

Creating the Right Mix of Members

Look at your Design Team. Do you have enough people to launch this group? If you need additional people, think about the sorts of skills, personalities and work experience of folks you want to work with. Later, once you are up-and-running, you may want to invite subject matter experts to be guest speakers from time to time.

People Will Come and Go

Be ready for turnover. It's natural. Things change. Some members will find jobs; others will drop out. You'll be sorry to see them go, but bid them farewell. And leave the door open for their return.

On the flip side, others will want to join you. While it's exciting when a prospective member is interested in your group, be thoughtful about who to include. Suggest they come to one of your meetings to meet everyone. This will give the group and prospective member the opportunity to determine fit.

Getting Started

After the planning you'll launch. It's exciting. It's also scary. Who will show up? How needy will they be? Will you be able to help each other?

Learning Fast

Because many other groups have arrived on the scene before yours, you do not have to reinvent the wheel. In fact, a good way to learn fast is to find an ongoing group or two and meet with them. Ask questions. Pick their brains. Find out what pitfalls they encountered. Ask them, What works?

Getting Feedback

After your debut event, and then periodically, it's important to check in with group members for feedback. Is the group helping them? Do they feel they can contribute? What do they like? Dislike? What programming would they like to see?

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Renewing

As time goes on and your group continues to meet it's important to take stock of what you have experienced, what went well, what did not go so well, what you'd like to do differently and what you learned. Set aside some time from the normal routine and take time to celebrate all the good that has come from the group.

Closing Thought

Remember this: job search support groups can do a great deal of good for you and your colleagues. They create the opportunity to meet many interesting, helpful people while navigating through your transition. Reflect on where you are in your job search and consider joining or forming a group that supports your goal to land. Keep in mind that what you do may be the answer to someone's prayers!

The Authors

Janice Lee Juvrud is an Organization Development Consultant and Executive Coach based in West Milford, NJ. After her own downsizing, she joined the Professional Services Group (PSG) in Dover, NJ and also formed a group with colleagues in transition. In order to learn about area networking groups she collected the details of existing groups and created a Job Search Resources document to send to others in transition.

Today this document has over 60 groups and the number is growing every month. She distributes this to over 400 people monthly and is looking forward to a time when so many groups won't be needed! To reach her:

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Terrence Seamon is a Training & Organization Development professional based in New Brunswick, NJ. As a veteran of corporate downsizings, Terry has joined many job search support groups, including PSG, the Breakfast Club, the CIT Group, and the famous "Dick Stone Group." Plus he has started a couple: The St Matthias Employment Ministry in Somerset, NJ, and the virtual Yahoo group called the Human Resources Development Networking Group, designed to assist Training & OD folk who are looking for work. To reach him:

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