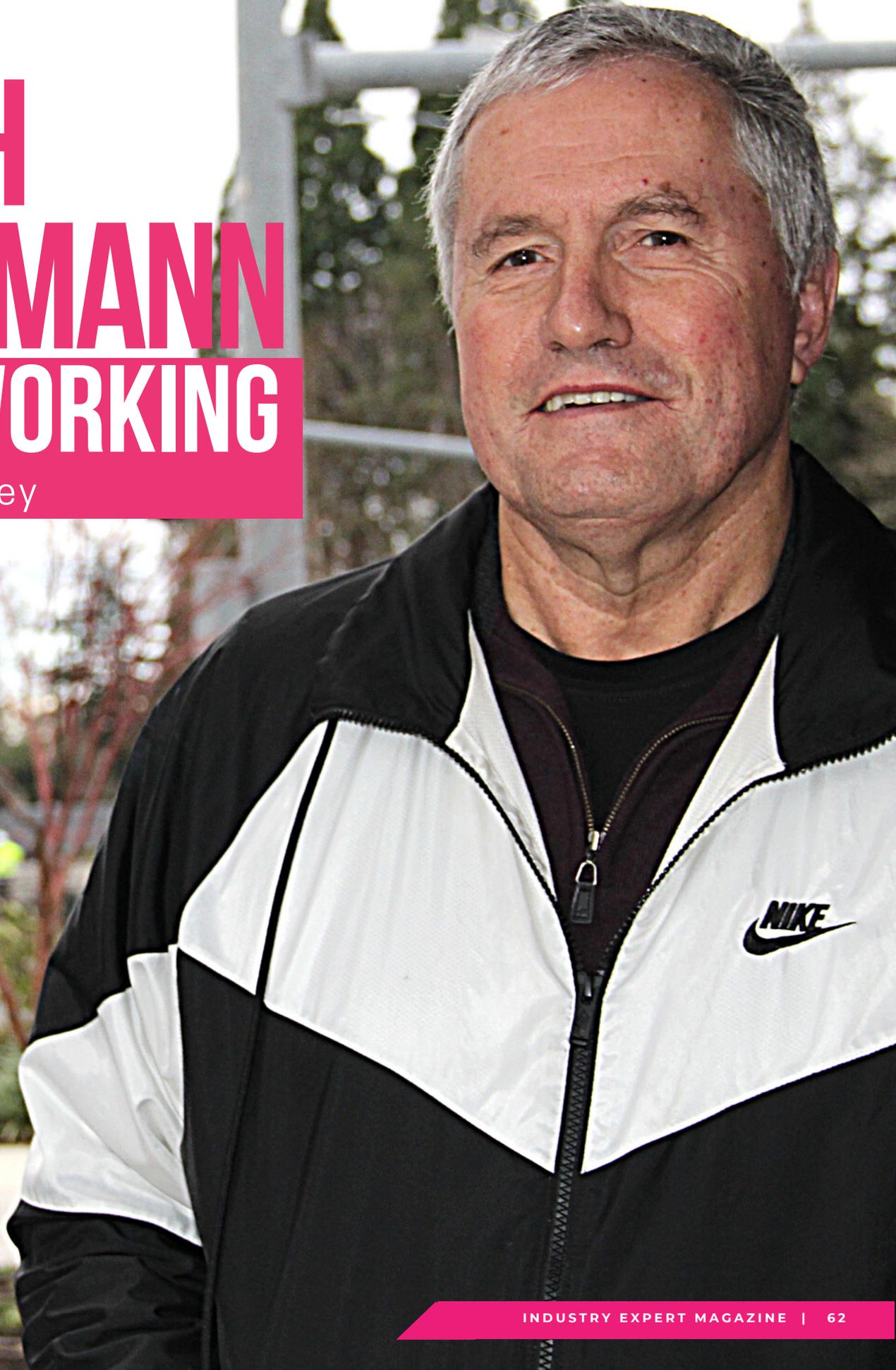


RICH LEHMANN NETWORKING

By: Gina Riley



RICH LEHMANN NETWORKING

These days, there is no such thing as job security. When the economy takes a dive, hard work, seniority, or experience may not save you. However, there is one place a job seeker can find a path to uncover job opportunities and that is within your network of professionals, colleagues, and friends.

I interviewed Rich Lehmann, who went to extraordinary lengths to network and held not 10, not 20, but 99 conversations with employees at his target company, Nike. Lehmann has a long career as an operations professional across manufacturing, energy and utilities, supply chain management, consulting, and quality.

Now retired, Lehmann gives back by volunteering with Lake Grove Job Seekers, a job search support community, by helping people and organizations in the areas of business and career growth. He is passionate about building strong relationships and developing people. It gives him great joy to help people realize their potential and move into a job they love.

I invite you to read on to hear about Rich's incredible networking journey to land a job at Nike.



Rich, would you give me a quick career overview? What is your area of professional expertise?

I've got 30 years in global operations and supply chain management with companies like Nike, PacifiCorp, Planar, and many more. I've been a production manager, strategic sourcing manager, and procurement professional, and I have experience across global supply chain management. The thread throughout is a focus on quality, which can go by different names, like LEAN business practices, Six Sigma, or continuous process improvement. Basically, it is making business processes better for the customer, which applies to all realms of supply chain and manufacturing. This is where I found my niche.

Prior to this, I was in the Navy and ended up teaching math and physics to those operating nuclear reactors on submarines. I fell into operations where I found my passion for developing people, and systems and producing something tangible for consumers.

**Let's jump right into it!
Over the course of your career, when
have you felt the most stuck? When
have you struggled to figure out your
next career move?**

There have been a lot of ups and downs for professionals in supply chain management and I have been through many layoffs. It was especially volatile for those in the display industry which had a lot of uncontrolled growth and declines.

Each time I was laid off I felt stuck and wondered what to do next. I would fall back into the same type of job search activities and would end up landing similar jobs time after time.

The most difficult layoff and crossroads came in 2008. We all know what happened in 2008! I was living in Portland, Oregon, and was let go from LG International after only a year of service. I told myself I was at the point in my career where I wanted to target a particular company and not throw my resume out on the street hoping to get hired.

You wanted to avoid the “spray and pray” application method?

Right! This is what led me to target Nike. I am crazy about sports and Nike is in my backyard. I could ride my bike to work. I knew people who worked there who said it was great. So, I cleared the decks and focused on what it would take to get into Nike.

When you got laid off from LG International, would you share how you changed up your job search methods?

Initially, I signed up to be in six networking groups. I hit the street and started showing up. I really hit it off with Lake Grove Job Seekers, which is a nonprofit led by retired executives who give back by mentoring and helping job seekers like me. They help mid-level professionals who've either been laid off or career pivoting gain support in finding their next opportunity.

It took you eighteen months to land at Nike. That is a long time! What was that like?

There were a lot of us in the same boat within Job Seekers. I became a part of a subset of supply chain professionals that are called 'grit groups' which meet offline weekly, share information, and hold members accountable. We called our 'grit group' the 'Supply Chain Gang.' I still meet with this group of seven to this day! Having a support group was key to getting through such a long process.



I have a juicy question for you. When you meet with like-minded job seekers from the same industry, possibly the same level professionally, how did you avoid feeling competitive with each other?

It was not an issue because we were of the mindset that we were all in this together - all for one and one for all helping each other out. We went around the table and reported on what we were looking for, our progress, what we needed help with, asking for contacts ... we were not really competing for the same position. We all shared the anxious feelings about the state of the economy and felt we needed to pull together to help each other out.

What was the inspiration for the networking approach you took?

The first difference in my approach versus previous efforts was narrowing my target to Nike.

My cohorts thought I was crazy because they were taking the same approach I had always taken - throwing your resume out on the street and see what sticks. I was totally laser focused on Nike.

I had made a run at Nike previously in 2005 and found you don't get into Nike by posting your resume because there is too much competition. I was told, at least back then, for every job opening on the Nike website there are 700 online applications. Right away that told me the only way I was going to be able to break into Nike was through networking. This was my mindset in 2008.

I had three hurdles on this journey.

For one, applying online was not going to work. Second, I came to realize it is hard to break into Nike at 60-years old - the mean age of people working at Nike is 30-something. I was double that! So, my age was a factor. Third, I was not coming from the same industry.

I knew I had these hurdles to overcome, and I dedicated myself to do whatever it took. I started with networking. I told myself I was going to learn everything I could about Nike.



You were overcoming incredible obstacles – especially during difficult times in the economy. There are a lot of people who get similarly stuck during inopportune times, but they don't lead with networking and a learner's mindset.

I knew I would not land a job overnight with the economy in the tank. Everyone I spoke with told me their headcount was frozen. But I came to the decision I was willing to pursue this as a long-term effort. Fortunately, my wife was working, and she was willing to support me. I had the benefit of time that many job seekers do not have.

It took you a long time. Eighteen months. Where does your grit and stamina come from?

The more I read and learned about Nike, the more determined and dedicated I became to be a part of it. I found Nike to be a very collaborative and team-based company and was able to verify this through my conversations. I'm a servant leader and like to support people, so I knew this was the environment for me. I had to figure out a way to get in there and was willing to give it my best shot.

Did you get your dream job in the end? Why did it take so long?

My dream was to land a job. That was my number one objective.

It took me a long time for two reasons. First, I had to figure out my value proposition, how to tie that to Nike's needs and figure out how to market myself. This took research. What I found was Nike was focused on adopting and implementing LEAN processes throughout the

company – which was a strength of mine and a common thread throughout my career. Second, the global economic situation was tamping down new job opportunities from opening.

I know from working in a large global company that it can take a long time to understand the complexities of how it operates. This would take a lot more time than if you were targeting a handful of companies that might have 200 employees. I also appreciate how you were sharpening your value proposition and not leading the conversations with an 'I can do it all' approach. I hear this over and over from leaders who are in career transition. I interviewed Jennifer Davis who says you need to lead with your 'sharp tool' and not your 'Swiss Army knife' when speaking to decision-makers.

What you are sharing reminds me of another conversation I had with Keith Thomajan who made a challenging career move from nonprofit to a corporate leadership role. He met with many leaders in his network and asked for their time by telling them he was 'trying to get smarter' about his transition process and how his skills would transfer. You and he had a similar, gentle way of saying you simply wanted to learn.

I know Jennifer Davis! I love that analogy!

People like to give and share information! It is very energizing for the person on the other side of the table. Relationship building becomes more of a challenge if it turns into



“ I found my passion for developing people, and systems and producing something tangible for consumers ”

the job seeker pitching themselves. I recommend approaching these conversations to gather information and not to feel shut down if you are not offered a job.

How did you find the right people to target? And then, what follow up did you do after meeting with them?

When I was job hunting in 2005, I met a Nike recruiter. Even though his focus wasn't for positions I was focused on, he and I hit it off and I kept him on my radar. Although we'd fallen completely out of touch, he was the first person I reached out to when I got laid off in 2008. Lo and behold, he remembered me and asked how he could help me out!

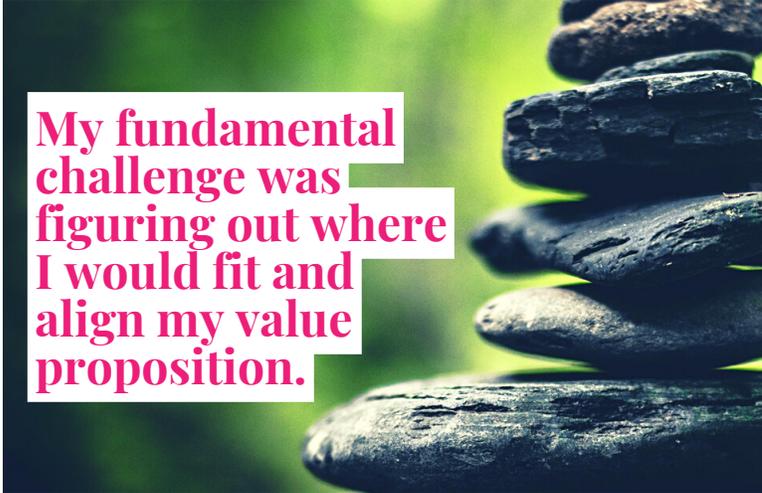
This was a stroke of luck because the first guy he put me in touch with eventually became my mentor – and still is to this day. He was a supply chain guy who was well-networked within Nike and took me under his wing.

Many people will be envious to hear you gained a senior mentor so early in your process. What was it about you that allowed him to open himself up to having a relationship?

I'm a relationship builder and went into networking with the idea I was not asking for a job. My job was to be a sponge, build relationships, and learn.

Let me tell you, he doled out a lot of tough love. In our first meeting, I showed him my resume. He just laughed and tore it up! He told me that it was not a Nike resume and that to get into Nike I'd need to have a very narrow value proposition.

I still remember to this day him laughing when I told him I had thirty years in supply chain and that I could do anything. He told me that was the wrong answer! He said I needed to know exactly where I would fit into Nike - and only then he could help me. This led me down the path of doing research on the organization, business, financial statements, press releases, and every book I could get my hands on. He gave me homework every time we met.



My fundamental challenge was figuring out where I would fit and align my value proposition.

You had ninety-nine conversations over an 18-month period – 20 with your mentor. How did you identify the other 79 people?

Twenty separate meetings were with my mentor. My mentor was well connected and introduced me to many of the people, plus I had friends who worked there who made introductions, too. I reached out by phone and email, emphasizing I was not there for a job – which was of course in the back of my head - but wanted to sit down and learn from them.

When I asked Nike people to meet with me, 90% of them said 'yes' on one hand while mentioning their headcount was frozen or they were laying people off. I would look them in the eye and tell them I was not there to get a

job but to learn more about Nike's culture and business. It was all about building that initial relationship.

I found people were more than willing and loved meeting up because it was a pleasant break from the layoffs and tough decisions. The favored meeting place was a little cafe on the Nike campus called the Boston Deli. Most of my conversations were held there. I'd put on my Nike shoes, jeans, and a polo, and acted as if I belonged there.

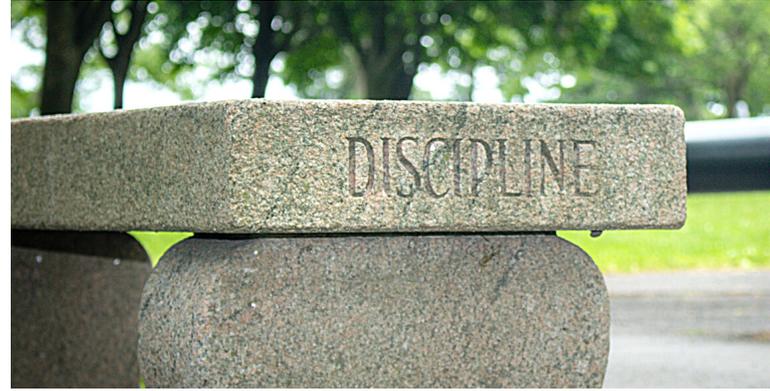
Would you share your personal rules of engagement for networking?

My first rule of engagement is when you reach out – **only ask for 20 minutes of their time**. What I found was if I could capture them for 20 minutes, they would give me an hour or 90 minutes. This tip is key because think about it. When you're on the other side of the table and get an e-mail from a stranger asking you for an hour of your time. Well, they are going to say they are busy! But they can usually spare 20 minutes. They liked strolling over to the Boston Deli for a cup of coffee.

Before every meeting, **I did my research and came prepared with written questions** I'd really thought about and had them ready and in front of me. **I found out as much as I could about each person** before I met them, so I could make some guesses about their interests, style, and personality. If I guessed they would want to get right down to business, I kept things to the point. If they wanted to get to know each other personally, we might talk about sports or family. I modified my approach with each person.

I took notes and kept a log with the details of these conversations, down to personal

details, kids' names, and sports and such on a spreadsheet so I could recall them down the line. It would blow people away if I had remembered these details and taken an interest in them.



What a remarkable act of discipline! Do you have any other rules of engagement?

Yes! I'd always **show up ten minutes early** to every meeting, grab a booth ... and when the person walked in, I made it easy for them to stroll in by being ready to go. **I had my resume tucked away but never pulled it out unless they asked for it**.

I was always mindful of their time and would mention when we hit the 20-minute mark, so they had a chance to cut the conversation short. Most of the time they stayed longer, and they opened up based on my questions.

Finally, **I followed up**. I brought a blank Hallmark card with a stamped, addressed envelope and immediately wrote and mailed a handwritten thank you with insights as to what I had learned.

I think the thing people appreciated the most was I prepared questions about their roles and function at the company.

Wow! This shows incredible EQ (Emotional Quotient) and the ability to read the room. I imagine this is also how you got people's time by customizing your approach and messaging. You got people talking about their expertise – people like talking about themselves and their expertise! You gave them the floor versus making it all about your career story. That's a whole different exchange.

Yes – they would really open up. I found the key was that it was all about them and not me.

Would you give me a sense of the ratio of senior leaders you were meeting with compared to individual contributors?

It was probably 60% senior leadership and 40% individual contributors. The leaders gave me strategic insights and the other folks talked about their day-to-day challenges in the trenches. Knowing the level of the person I was speaking to became important to me and guided the development of my questions. I would ask them what a normal day was like and what keeps them up at night.

How did you come across as not sounding like spam?

If I got a referral from my mentor, I was in. If I had to cold call without a referral and the person didn't know me, I carefully worded my e-mail. It goes back to saying that I was only there to learn, and I would only take 20 minutes of their time.

Not everybody would meet with me. I got put off. But I would say 80% of the ones that I didn't get a referral would meet with me, which I think are exceptional results.

Does networking come naturally to you?

The more I did it the more I enjoyed it. I really enjoyed talking to people because I got fascinating insights and directions about what to study and learn. It was a very rewarding experience.

Take me to your mentorship role with Lake Grove Job Seekers.

I was laid off by Nike in March of 2021. It was a shock to get laid off. I didn't think it would happen. I was 70 years old and told my wife this would be my last job. It was time for me to give back. I was so impressed with what Job Seekers did for me that I asked to join. They welcomed me with open arms. I'm still at it today.

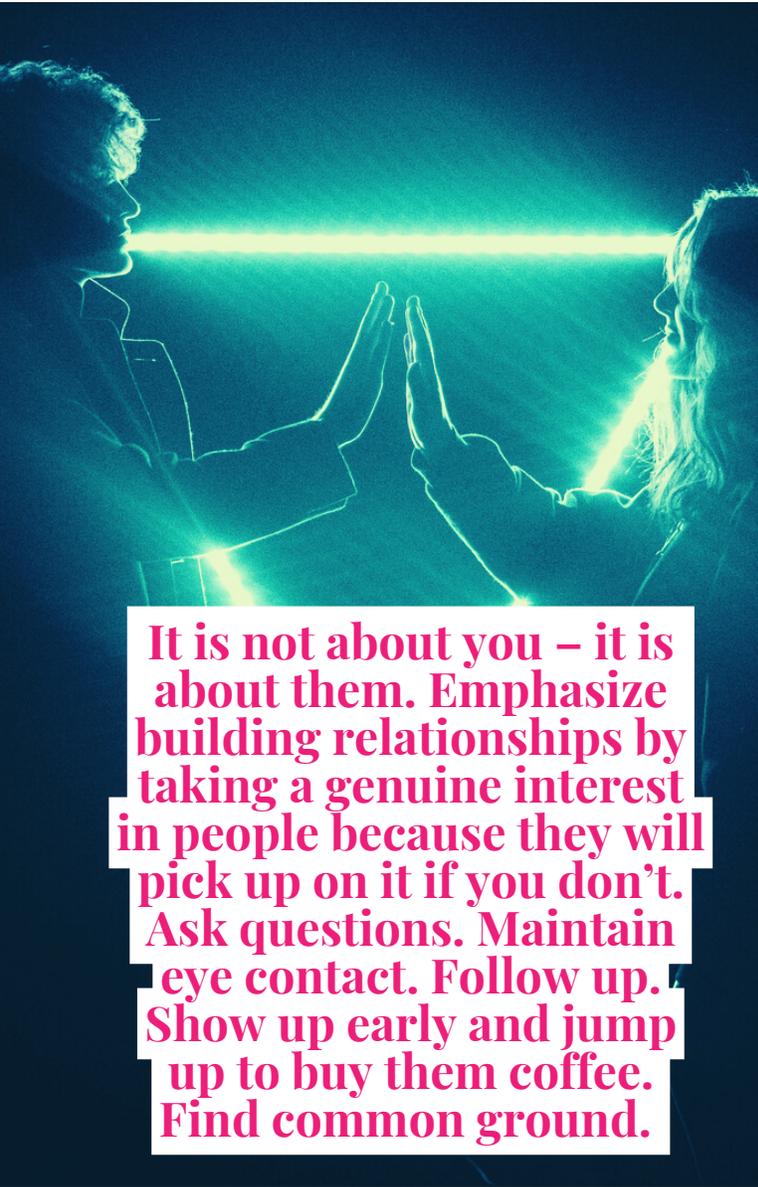
We meet every Monday morning and have guest speakers talk on career-related topics. We also provide online resources and opportunities to skill build. It is completely voluntary and has zero cost to job seekers. Each mentor is assigned a group to oversee. We help with resume updates, LinkedIn profiles, networking strategies, and mock interviews. If they have a panel interview, we assemble people to give them practice and immediate feedback.

Our mission statement is we help job seekers help themselves get a job. The onus is on the job seeker to get a job. We don't find one for them, but we help them go through the process.

Nobody cares as much about landing the job more than the job seeker themselves.

That is exactly right.

What is your top advice for building relationships in your career and in your life?



It is not about you – it is about them. Emphasize building relationships by taking a genuine interest in people because they will pick up on it if you don't. Ask questions. Maintain eye contact. Follow up. Show up early and jump up to buy them coffee. Find common ground.

Get in the right frame of mind. For me, that was spending quiet time thinking and reflecting. Prepare questions. I find some networkers are clearly coming from chaos. They couldn't find a parking place. They forgot about our meeting until a half hour ago. Get in the right mindset, take a deep breath, and tell yourself it will be fun. I am going to enjoy this and get a lot out of it.

What would you say to people who are trying to do their job search alone or in a vacuum?

This is absolutely the wrong approach. We have job seekers who do just that. They sit in front of their PC all day and submit applications. As you say, they spray and pray. This is the wrong way to go about it. The research tells us a small percentage of people land jobs by applying online.

I understand you have never refused a networking request.

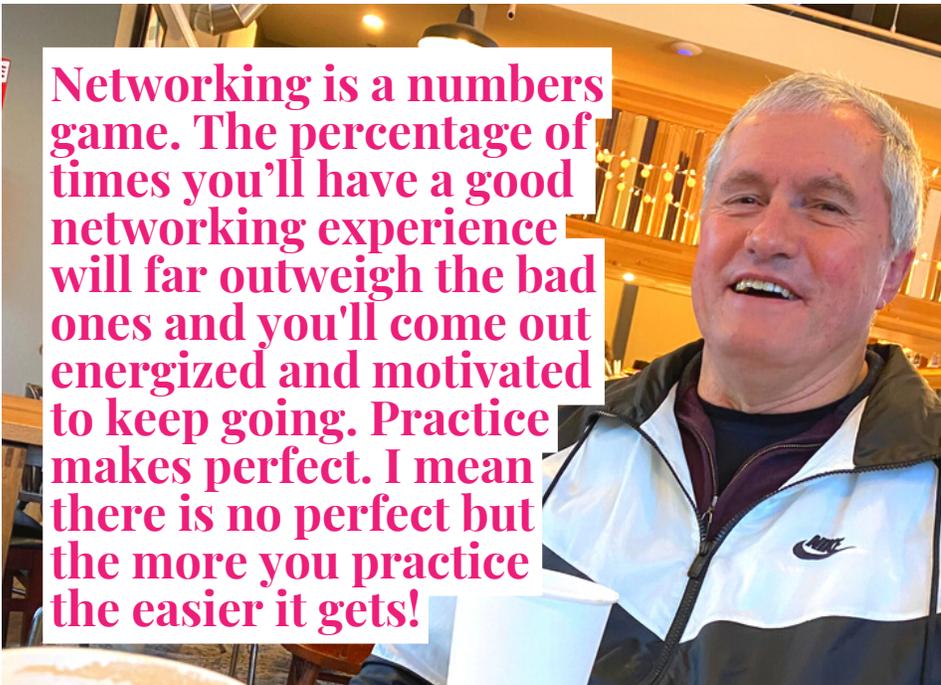
Never ever. Over eleven years, I have had over one hundred conversations, mostly sent from Job Seekers who were interested in jobs at Nike.

What advice do you have to help people overcome their resistance to asking for help?

You need a certain amount of humility. I have seen people, especially executives, who don't want to ask for help because they think they've got things under control. They've been down the block and know what to do. You need humility to ask others for help to learn about your target organizations and what keeps the leaders up at night. You must be a sponge, set your ego aside, stay humble, and go into learner mode.

Anything else you would add to aid job seekers and those who struggle with networking?

To the jobseeker struggling with networking, I would say try it and you'll like it. In the workshop I am giving tomorrow on networking, I'll say if you are scared or feeling shy – just jump in the water. The worst that can happen is the meeting is a disaster and you don't hit it off with the person. Or you get flustered – you just go on.



Networking is a numbers game. The percentage of times you'll have a good networking experience will far outweigh the bad ones and you'll come out energized and motivated to keep going. Practice makes perfect. I mean there is no perfect but the more you practice the easier it gets!

Rich Lehmann went to extraordinary lengths during a down economy to land at his ideal company by first reconnecting with a very loose tie and then convincing eighty people to meet with him on his discovery journey. He did so with a clear target and a consistently successful networking approach. Hopefully, you've gained inspiration to help you devise an effective networking strategy of your own.

I am proud to share stories about how effective networking strategies help job seekers find and land ideal positions. You can find my series, How Your Next Executive Role Finds You on my consulting website where I've featured many CxO leaders and their networking stories and the ways they navigated the hidden job market with their approach. You can find this series and more at www.GinaRileyConsulting.com.

CONTRIBUTING WRITER'S PROFILE



Gina Riley Consulting & creator of the Career Velocity™ System. She is a career transition coach who helps leaders customize their career stories to land jobs where they can leave a legacy. She is an Executive Search Consultant for Talence Group.



CONTACT GINA:

ginarileyconsulting.com

 [ginariley](https://www.linkedin.com/company/ginariley)