Adjusting to the "New Normal": The Impact of Covid-19 on Networking

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As the global pandemic set in, we saw millions of people suffering physically, mentally, and financially. We were all forced to adjust to life in a new way. However, as with any negative situation, there is always a silver lining. When it comes to employment, individuals have been forced to explore their adaptability and new strategies for effectively completing tasks predominantly from home.

As a non-profit organization that serves newcomers, Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS) continues to offer virtually all service online (with limited on-site services) during the pandemic. While this transition initially required quick adaptation from staff, it has since brought about many new strategies and opportunities: staff have been trained on new forms of technology, have explored professional development, and have been able to provide high-quality service for our clients.

In terms of employment, ISANS' Employment and Bridging team has hosted countless virtual job fairs and networking opportunities. With each opportunity, we are learning and adjusting!

As such, we have decided to present **two parts to this article: advantages of networking online and tips for online networking.** If you read until the end, we have also included a bonus section for service providers to share with newcomers!

Advantages of Networking Online

ISANS conducted surveys across departments working directly with employers and job seekers. We subsequently identified the *top five advantages of networking online*:

1) It encourages a much more targeted approach, eliminating potential awkwardness

We have all had the experience of attending a large networking event with an overwhelming amount of employers, industry experts, and job seekers. For alternative language speakers especially, the idea of approaching individuals to introduce themselves can be overwhelming to say the least.

However, networking online allows job seekers (and employers alike) to reach out to the particular individuals of interest or attend targeted events, rather than interacting within a larger crowd. It also forces job seekers to better prepare to promote themselves within virtual spaces, as they may be informed ahead of the event that they will have an opportunity to chat with employers using tools such as breakout rooms.

Knowing who may be attending the event allows job seekers to better research, prepare, and target the employers or individuals with whom they wish to connect – which is more likely to result in successful relationship building.

2) **Job seekers are more likely to get a response, since the alternative is now difficult to explore**

Prior to the pandemic, we have witnessed many employers ignore virtual networking opportunities in favour of face-to-face interactions. In some cases, employers would use online exchanges, such as LinkedIn messages, strictly to set up an in-person meeting.

However, with few in-person exchanges taking place, many job seekers have observed increasing success when reaching out to employers online. Employers seem more likely to respond on platforms such as LinkedIn, and we are seeing many setting up "virtual coffees" with job seekers, as the alternative face-to-face coffee is not possible in most cases.

3) **Features such as breakout rooms make relationship-building easier and more personal**

Using online platforms such as Zoom allows organizers to divide participants into smaller groups, called breakout rooms. ISANS and many other organizations have used this tool for countless events, and consistently received positive feedback from both employers and attendees.

Breakout rooms also allow participants to build more personal connections, and they make exchanges easier. Letting attendees know in advance they will have a chance to break up into smaller groups is useful so that participants know what to expect. They will be more confident and comfortable knowing ahead of time that they should be prepared to promote themselves or discuss certain topics.

4) **It increases convenience and saves resources**

One of the undeniable advantages of networking online is the increased reach it provides for clients. While internet connectivity can be a challenge for some, we have received feedback from both employers and clients that virtual services are in fact incredibly accessible.

This increased accessibility is especially apparent when organizations serve rural communities as well as individuals who have lengthy commutes or families. Depending on where a person lives and whether they drive or take transit, travel can deplete both their time and finances. Also, family members may even miss chances to receive services because they must remain home with children or dependents.

Thankfully, virtual delivery is extremely convenient and eases these restraints. While it can undoubtedly be challenging to balance familial and employment responsibilities at home, virtual networking has made it possible to do both at once. This convenience has saved significant time and resources for many!

5) **Opportunities for new training and professional development**

Prior to the shift toward working from home, many may have been comfortable, but not entirely proficient, with tools such as online platforms.

With the need for many organizations to shift to online work, countless staff have been trained in new areas, especially technology. This advancement means many have had the opportunity to expand their skill set and offer services in new, innovative ways.

In addition, *tons* of online professional development opportunities are available–often for free–that both staff and job seekers are able to explore! Many staff have used their time at home to study or seek professional development opportunities.

Tips for Networking Online

Additionally, we compiled the *top ten tips for successfully networking online,* which can be applied to service providers working with newcomers or other clientele:

1) Be well-versed in the platform you are using

Because networking event hosts are dependent on the technology working well for the event to run smoothly, it is very important that event hosts take the time to train themselves accordingly.

There are many tutorials offered by online platforms, which is a good starting point. Once familiar, it is wise to do a 'run through'—in other words, practice going through the event with co-workers in advance. Practicing will help hosts know what to expect, as well as some of the potential challenges they may face in real time.

2) Offer to collaborate with other organizations

Collaboration is key! When trying to draw in attendees, consider reaching out to other, potential organizations of interest to engage participants. People are more likely to participate when they can reach more stakeholders in one event.

3) Try to include a more condensed, engaging format

Consider the time and attention span of your audience. While participants may be able to join from the comfort of their homes, they may get bored or lose focus if the speaker(s) present for extended periods with minimal interactivity or breaks.

Unlike face-to-face networking opportunities, individuals cannot get up and walk around to speak to other attendees. Therefore, we encourage presenters to take breaks or change the presentation formatting every 10-15 minutes to maximize engagement.

4) Prepare, rehearse, and have a backup plan to encourage engagement

Keep in mind that joining a virtual networking event also means less visibility for participants, and by extension, it is easier to *not* participate and engage, if desired.

This means that the presenter(s) should have a clear plan in terms of content, what they want to say, and have a backup plan! If the audience does not seem particularly engaged, have some clear alternatives in place to try to adjust accordingly.

For instance, if people seem shy to contribute in a larger group, or alternatively, many seem to want to contribute but there is limited time, breakout rooms may be a good option; smaller groups give more participants the ability to contribute and a more intimate setting to do so.

5) Provide attendees with clear instructions on the event breakdown *prior* to the event

Some attendees may be newer to the platform you're using, or even to online networking in general. It can be very helpful to provide some information or even links on how the selected platform works. One-page, step-by-step guides have proven incredibly useful!

It will also help to give a breakdown of the event early on, such as whether attendees will be broken up into smaller groups, and if they will be expected to discuss, participate, or present, rather than simply attend.

6) Use interactive components as much as possible

As mentioned, breakout rooms are one excellent tool to allow participants to build relationships and more personalized connections.

Additional interactive elements such as encouraging attendees to take part in polls or surveys can also be very interesting! This gives attendees a reason to stay focused on the screen, and gives them an opportunity to learn more about other attendees.

7) Encourage, but do not force participants to use cameras

Many have noted that participants are often shy to put on their cameras, or may be in a situation where they are forced to work or attend from home alongside other family members. Some may not have an appropriate office space. This may result in participants being uncomfortable putting their cameras on, especially if they did not anticipate this expectation.

While participants should be encouraged to put their cameras on whenever possible, especially when networking, they should not be *forced* to do so.

If employers are expecting to meet and see job seekers, explain the incentive and potential positive impact of dressing appropriately with the camera on before the event. Giving participants notice of this expectation will also help them to prepare, dress appropriately, and find the right space to participate.

8) Create recognition or awards

When given the opportunity, one fun and engaging way to increase event participation is by offering incentives such as recognition or awards to individuals or organizations.

While many online presentations risk being monotonous, a little healthy competition can encourage attendees to pay attention and motivate participation.

9) Have technical support available whenever possible

While practicing and training yourself in advance is highly recommended, there is no denying that sometimes, technical issues do arise—often at inconvenient times. In such cases, it can be very helpful to have technical support ready to help, or even another co-worker who is well-versed in the platform.

Another tip is to have a backup device accessible if possible—another computer, laptop, or even iPad—as needed.

10) Follow up!

Networking events can elevate organizational status, and help create excellent partnerships or collaborative opportunities with other organizations.

As event hosts, it is crucial to follow up with other organizations in attendance to thank them and discuss future possibilities for collaboration.

It is also important to follow up with all registered attendees by sharing information such as the presentation itself (and possibly a recording), as well as information on future events. This can help keep attendance high for future events, as well as give attendees the opportunity to share and promote details with others they know who may be interested.

Bonus: Templates to Share with Job Seekers when Networking Online

While this article has mostly discussed online networking from the perspective of service providers, we wanted to include a section specifically for service providers to share with newcomer job seekers.

One of the main challenges we see with newcomer job seekers looking to network is not knowing what to say when they initially reach out—or worse—saying the *wrong* thing.

It is important that job seekers do not come off as too aggressive or demanding; at the same time, they must be straightforward and respectful of the other professional's time. Coming on too strong, or not clearly getting to the point, are two of the common challenges newcomers face when reaching out to potential employers of interest.

Job seekers can avoid this by sending a short, concise message that clearly states why they are reaching out, but also not overloading the recipient with too much information. Job seekers should refrain from attaching documents or significant amounts of information when initially reaching out, unless specifically requested in a prior exchange.

Below are some helpful template examples that job seekers may use when networking online.

Reaching out to an employer with no mutual connections, but shared interests

Hi _____ (First name),

I noticed that you are in the _____ industry, and we have done quite similar work. I, like you, have a passion for _____ and figured it would be great to connect. I would love the opportunity to chat with you further about _____ (area of interest) at your earliest convenience.

Best,
First + Last name

Reaching out to an employer with mutual connections

If you have mutual connections, see if your mutual connection(s) would mind putting in a good word before reaching out. With their permission, you can then use a template such as the one below:

Hi _____ (First name),

Like you, I am also in the _____ industry, and noticed we have quite a few shared connections. In particular _____ (First + Last name of shared connection) recommended that I reach out to you, as they said you would be a great point of contact for me as an expert in the _____ (area of expertise) area. I am looking to learn more about / discuss _____ (area of interest) and would love to chat further at your convenience!

Best,
First + Last name

Reaching out to an employer to follow up after a networking event

Hi _____ (First name),

It was a pleasure meeting you at the _____ (event name) yesterday. I really enjoyed _____ (our conversation/discussion/your presentation) and figured it would be great to connect.

Moving forward, I was hoping for the opportunity to chat further, as I would love to learn more about _____ (area of interest). Let me know if you may have the time in the coming weeks, and I will be happy to coordinate based on your availability.

Looking forward to hearing back!
First + Last name

Happy networking!