



## But Officer, I Have Excellent Contacts!

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*A lady was pulled over for speeding. The police officer, upon examining her license, noted that she was required to wear corrective lenses while driving. He started to write out a ticket, and the lady exclaimed in protest, "But officer, I have excellent contacts!" He promptly responded, "Listen, I don't care who you know, I'm giving you this ticket."*

*A very old joke, but what's the connection to environment, health, and safety? It is this: Having excellent contacts is absolutely essential. Indeed, it may be the most important aspect of your career, yet is often the element that is managed haphazardly, if at all. This article offers guidance for building your own network of contacts.*

**C**ollectively, the authors' careers span nearly 60 years. We have seen tremendous changes to the environment, health, and safety (EH&S) profession over these years, and there are no signs that things are "settling down." If anything, the only "constant" that we could rely on is that the company or department we were working in would be substantially different in about five years. Maybe a little longer, maybe sooner, but our own work environment would be different. We could depend on it. *You* should count on this inevitable change in managing your own career. If you work for a non-government organization, consulting firm, industry, or government agency, it is the same situation.

Much has been written about the changing work force and the improbability of working with one company over an entire career until retirement. Keeping your skills current, being flexible, learning new skills, and so on have been extensively covered. Relentlessly devoting energy to improving your skills is especially important for environmental

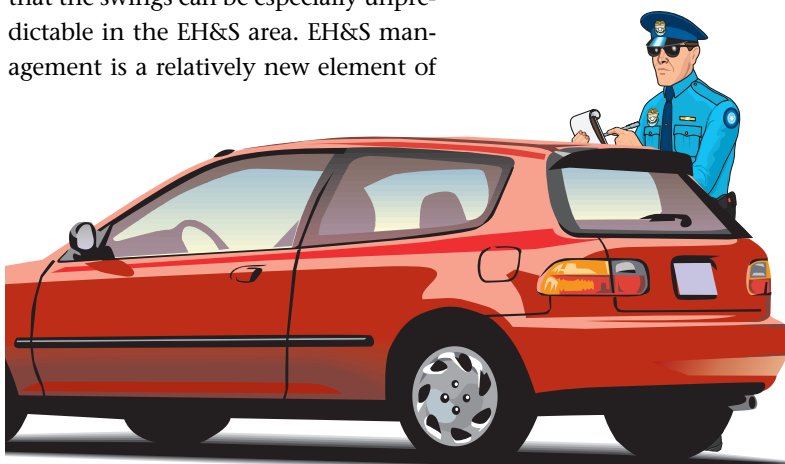
professionals. So is building a network of contacts. Let us explain.

Standards for corporate EH&S performance are emerging. They are moving beyond a focus on compliance to less-defined territory that can cover a wide range of management options. The direction can shift significantly with the arrival of a new CEO, management team, or in the case of a government agency, elected officials. How often have you heard that management support is critical and that "top-down" support is essential for success? It's true.

Changing direction from above applies to any profession, but we believe that the swings can be especially unpredictable in the EH&S area. EH&S management is a relatively new element of

money to pay off a mortgage—they had a mission. It matters.

If you are not satisfied with the direction in which things are headed and you are powerless to control the outcome, it may bother you and provide another motivation to look elsewhere. It is not a question of compliance versus non-compliance strategy. The profession has moved far beyond this simplistic view of the field by management to concepts such as the triple bottom line and a sustainable future. Pick up any issue of this *EM* magazine and you'll find one or more articles that ad-



corporate strategy. *The implications are that you may need to deal with another layer of uncertainty on top of a sea of change.*

Many EH&S professionals whom we have met over the years are motivated by deep-seated personal convictions on doing right by the environment. It's not just a career, but a *mission*! Jake and Elwood, in the hilarious movie "The Blues Brothers," were not just raising

vocate these concepts. The higher you are in the organization, the greater the impact that business management's direction and philosophy will have on your job satisfaction.

Well, what does all this mean to you? Simply stated: be prepared. I have a friend, Frank, who is a "survival" expert. Each year he travels to Fort Bragg, NC, to teach Green Berets some of these

skills. Once he showed me a backpack that he can grab on a moment's notice that will allow him to survive for weeks in the wilderness areas of Arizona. That's preparedness at the extreme, but not of much use in the business world.

What should be at the top of your "backpack"? Your network of contacts inside and outside your company should be the first item available. Of all the skills required to prosper in a changing business world, networking may be one of the most important. It can be the source of the most current information and ideas. It can be a sounding board for your own creative ideas. Program sponsorship and personal mentoring within companies depend on

effective networking. Networking can also be the source of the best job leads. In the authors' current jobs, it is the source of valuable referrals and resources.

The cliché "It's not what you know, but whom you know" has a sound basis in fact. As important as networking may be,

it is all too often given little conscious thought. Everyone has contacts, but how many faithfully put energy into growing and maintaining their contacts each day? A mutual friend of ours once told us that many of the people we know in common from our days at General Electric only call him when they are looking for job leads. You can imagine the effort that he is willing to put into these requests.

Another friend recently downsized from his government position stated that his biggest regret was not keeping up with friends and professional colleagues over the years. "The lack of networking hurt me when I had to look for a new position. While the people I contacted were generally sympathetic, I felt awkward because in most cases, I had not spoken to these people in quite some time."

Networking is not a one-way street; that is, don't just call only when you need something. Another business associate of ours goes out of her way to search out and forward useful information to others. Another senior associate of ours may have stated it best recently: "Your Rolodex is

## ADVISOR CHECKLIST



### BUILDING A CONTACT NETWORK

1. Set up a database or file system to keep track of your contacts. Do it *now*, don't procrastinate:
  - At the *minimum*, have a well-organized business card file system.
  - Electronic databases are absolutely the best. You can sort, search, and make notes (see item 2 below).
  - There are hardware and software systems such as CardScan that scan business cards and organize the information into the correct fields. If you have an enormous inventory of cards, consider investing in one of these systems. In general, however, don't accumulate scores of business cards and then input them—the task will be so daunting that inertia will take over. Inputting is best done on an ongoing basis.
  - Commercial software systems such as Sidekick, GoldMine, Lotus Organizer, and Act! are available to help organize your contacts, task lists, and schedule information.
  - You can also set up a simple, custom database using Microsoft Access. Please contact the author if you would like a copy of his template in Access 97.
  - No matter what system you choose, make sure that the entire database can be downloaded into common files such as text files, dBASE, etc. You may need to convert to or download to another hardware/software system.
  - Personal Digital Assistants such as the original Palm Pilots by 3Com and those manufactured by Philips Mobile, Hewlett-Packard, Franklin Electronics, LandWare, and Psion bring an added degree of portability to carrying your contacts. You may want to sort your master list and download only key contacts.
  - Databases must be maintained and *backed up frequently*.
2. When you make a new contact, put additional information—such as when and where you met them, follow-up information, and areas of interest—either on the back of their business card, or better yet, in your database. This step is essential but often neglected.
3. Don't contact members of your key network only when you need something.
  - Prioritize your list and call or write key contacts periodically.
  - Share information; this is not a one-way proposition.

your survival kit. Mine was good, but it could have been much better. I now have a new rule. No matter whom I meet, I get their card. You never know when you'll need this contact in the future."

We have known very successful individuals over our careers who were masters at building relationships that formed the bases of business deals decades later. It takes time to build trust with these contacts. The contacts who are the most valuable to us are those established more than a decade ago. Professional organizations such as the Air & Waste Management Association can

play a vital role in your strategy to develop contacts and improve your skills. The conferences, committee work, and training programs offer numerous opportunities to meet other members with like interests and valuable new ideas.

We make a point of providing our current business cards to long-standing associates and each new contact we meet. Colleagues and friends call us looking for candid opinions, something that people are often reluctant to share with strangers. On a personal level, it is always interesting to learn how people are doing, including their careers, families, and recreational activities.

In the EH&S Advisor Checklist, we have summarized the basic considerations for establishing and maintaining your own network of contacts. Recognize that we are not describing a short list of personal friends and very close business associates. This is about a systematic method to access a broad range of individuals with whom you have had contact over your entire career. For example, your database can provide you with an "insider contact" at a company that just advertised your dream job in the perfect location. It can retrieve the name of the excellent speaker on life cycle analysis who impressed you at a conference three years ago. Without a way to access this information, you may be left scratching your head, frustrated that you missed an opportunity. ☹

## Please Ask, Please Tell

Is there an EH&S topic you would like addressed in the EH&S Advisor? Do you have information to share with your colleagues, and are you interested in possibly co-authoring a column on the subject? *EM* is interested in your ideas. Please contact Richard MacLean at phone: (480) 922-1620 or e-mail: [maclean@competitive-e.com](mailto:maclean@competitive-e.com).

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