



How to Network Your Way Into a Company: A Case Study

by Joanne Meehl

Candidate: Jayne Boyden*

January, pre-Internet era

After several months of exploring options, and informational interviews/career research meetings that validated her choice, Jayne Boyden knew that computer technology sales would be her next career. But she'd need sales training to enter the field, so her research pointed her to two companies: IBM and Xerox. Both sold computer technology, and both had renowned sales training programs. They were the quality companies she wanted to work for, and she had heard of both of them for years, and thought their technologies were exciting.

But she didn't know anyone "inside"... so how could she break in?

She put the word out among trusted co-workers and friends and family: Do you know anyone at IBM or Xerox? One of them, Mike, knew Matt, who sold copiers for Xerox, and she called him. She met Matt for dinner at a local pub, and he told her what he knew about the computer sales division. He gave her some names of some salespeople in that division. And Matt's discussion of sales, goals, and the culture reinforced for her that this was one of her target companies. She then sent Matt a thank-you note.

Jayne then began to try to reach some of the people whose names she now had. But she kept up with other efforts; her approach was multi-pronged.

At the time, there were retail stores that each company owned. She browsed through an IBM store and picked up materials but could make no meaningful contact with any of the staff. Jayne also attended a word processing seminar (really a sales pitch to businesses) at one of the Xerox stores, and was able to see the equipment she wanted to sell, and became familiar with names, models, and so forth. She hung back when others left and talked with the store manager, Pam. They set a coffee date and Pam asked her some good questions about "Why Xerox?", and told Jayne more about who was who in the computer sales division, specifically about Tom, who sold the equipment to corporations, and would be approachable. Jayne sent Pam a thank-you note afterward.

February

Jayne gathered her courage and called Tom, who was open to seeing her. At his invitation, she set up a meeting with Tom at the Lexington sales branch itself. She was now physically inside the actual division where she hoped to work, which was energizing, and Tom proved to be a help in getting her to understand who was who inside the division. Tom talked about the structure of the division, changes, and described the three hiring (sales) managers. Jayne made note of the names, and then Tom suggested she contact them herself for an exploratory interview. "They are always looking for good salespeople", he added. This would be a huge step.

March

Jayne prepared to call the three managers by learning more about the technology, and by outlining how her work in higher education had some striking similarities to sales, such as assessing the client's (customer's) needs, proposing a solution, and other points. She then called up each of the managers, landing a meeting with Don, then Steve. She did not connect with Mike D., the third, until later. Don's meeting was the most challenging: his tactic was to try to discourage her from leaving her current field. He was deliberately negative ("This is a tough place to work, why would you ever want to work here?"), and she found herself making the case for herself, and the meeting ended on an encouraging note, with Don recommending that she connect with HR so the company could officially get her in their system. The meeting with Steve was much more laid back and he recommended the same: do the HR thing so that if we hire, you'll be considered an official candidate. They had to give her the name and contact information of the Boston HR office, information not otherwise public because most hiring was done through the regional office in Connecticut. So this, too, was a breakthrough in the process. And she was now known to the hiring managers.

April

Now Jayne was in the HR loop, taking tests, going to informational sessions, and filling out forms. In parallel to her efforts at Xerox, Jayne was attempting to penetrate IBM. There, Jayne did not have the same kind of results. She did not know anyone in her network who could introduce her to many IBM contacts. Eventually a network contact who knew the hiring manager at a branch near Boston, wrote to him on her behalf. The manager gave her a courtesy interview, but the "feel" at IBM was more detached and did not compare with her comfort level developed so far at Xerox. She didn't believe the interview went very well – the manager was not convinced she could bridge between her current skills and selling skills -- and after writing a thank-you note, let IBM drop. She also landed interviews with a third computer company but it was not one of her top targets. And the feel there was entirely different, less professional. They ultimately offered her a job but she turned it down. As much as she wanted to sell computers, she wanted to do it for a higher caliber company *that would give her training* so that her new career would start out on the right foot.

May

Don the Xerox Sales Manager called to let her know there was an opening on his team and possibly one on another team. Was she still interested? She interviewed again, made the cut, and interviewed again. Between Don and Steve and some of their people, she had 4 interviews. She'd passed all the HR tests, and now was waiting to learn if she would get an offer from Xerox.

June

On the same day, Jayne received two letters from Xerox: one, from HR, saying "At this time, there are no openings, thanks but no thanks" (!), and the other, from Don the Xerox Sales Manager, offering her a job. She started with Xerox a few weeks later, to work for Steve. After she was in her territory for a few months, she applied for and landed a position working for Mike D. in another Xerox territory. Jayne was at Xerox over three years, setting a record for the largest sale made in her division in New England. She left to sell for a software company.

Summary

Today this approach would be even easier: so much information is available on the Internet, services like LinkedIn now exist, and e-mail makes things happen faster. But you still need to do the things Jayne did: research, talk to people, get out of your comfort zone, and keep on even when it feels awkward. If Jayne had waited for a Xerox job ad to appear, she'd still be waiting. And sales or otherwise, like many other jobs, the one she landed was not advertised.

Tenacity and *a burning desire to land a job with your target company* are the classic requirements for making this approach successful.

*pseudonym