

OPIA Podcast: Networking

JT: Hello and welcome to our podcast on networking with public interest employers and contacts. I'm Jillian Tuck, Assistant Director for J.D. and LL.M advising in HLS's Office of Public Interest Advising.

ES: And I'm Elizabeth Shirey, Assistant Director for J.D. Advising in OPIA. In this session, we'll talk about why networking is important in a public interest legal career, and how to approach it – even if it doesn't come naturally.

ES: So, Jillian, there's a lot of talk out there about how important networking is. We tell students to do it, other offices tell students to do it, they may have heard this during undergrad too. What is networking all about?

JT: Quite simply – networking is relationship-building! Not only does networking help you get familiar with the landscape of public interest law and build professional relationships that are going to help you identify job opportunities, but once you're out in the world as practicing lawyers, these relationships can do your job more effectively. Relationship-building produces contacts that can help you, help your clients -- and these are some of the folks who are going to be your mentors, your colleagues, your friends along the way.

ES: I love that framing as relationship-building. I sometimes hear from students that networking feels transactional or phony or fake. But if you think about who you just want to get to know more, ask questions because you're curious, build a rapport and a professional relationship – I think that feels more human than just hammering out a contacts list and approaching it like a chore.

ES: And there are lots of reasons to network. I think it's important to draw those out here for public interest legal work in particular. Why is networking important for students drawn to this kind of work?

JT: Lots of reasons. First, there's only so much you can learn about a particular field of law by being in the classroom. You need to get out there and talk to people who are doing it! Networking is really the best way to

learn more about what it's really like to be a lawyer in a particular field or work a particular organization.

For example, one great networking question is, "What does your day-to-day job actually look like?" Learning that level of detail can get you beyond the shiny organization websites into helping you assess whether a particular job would make you happy. Networking can also help you identify other organizations of interest. Having a conversation with one person can actually lead you to people at other organizations.

ES: And I think that can flow organically in some cases. Let's say you're speaking with someone about their organization, and they mention that they collaborate sometimes with advocates from other organizations in the same space. You could ask that follow-up -- "What are some of those groups that your organization works with?" Or, let's say they mention that they don't do as much litigation as some similar organizations do. You could ask, "What are some of the primary organizations handling litigation in this space?" That can lead you to more organizations, more potential contacts, more ways to refine your understanding of the field you're interested in.

JT: Definitely. But there is more! Networking can also help your job/internship search on a practical level. If you've had a good conversation with someone and followed up, this can be a foot in the door. That person might offer to look out for your application for an internship or job in the future, for example. If you apply to a job and can have your resume flagged by someone within that organization, that is huge! Knowing someone in an organization you're interested in, or know somebody who knows somebody, someone who will vouch for you -- will go a long way for your job search.

JT: In addition, Networking can also help you identify "hidden market" job openings. This is especially true in the public interest world. If you're an employer, hiring is time-consuming and hard. Sometimes, if a hiring manager can avoid sifting through a million resumes and hire someone that someone already knows, that can be an easy route for them. And some organizations will circulate job openings among a smaller circle of networks before posting them more widely. So you want to be in that smaller circle;

you want to be on the radar of people in those organizations, so you hear about opportunities first.

ES: And zooming out, too, from the job search -- networking will make your future work as a public interest lawyer more effective. It'll give you a more well-rounded understanding of the very wide-ranging legal field, and especially in public interest work, which is often intersectional, having some folks to call on who do other types of related work can be powerful. Having a strong network can help you refer clients who need different help than you can provide. In the advocacy world, doing joint campaigns, coordinated among several organizations, can be so much more effective than going at it alone.

JT: OK, but some listeners might still be saying, "ok ok, I get it. It has value. "That's all well and good, but this is still super awkward!" We hear you -- and let's untangle that feeling a little bit more. Elizabeth, let's go through some concerns we've heard about networking.

ES: Absolutely. One is about taking up people's time. "I feel like I'm annoying people!"

JT: Yes. Take it from us in OPIA -- we talk to employers and alumni on the other side of the networking equation, and most people are actually pretty excited to talk to you, especially while you're still a student. They were once law students too and they are usually very willing to pay it forward. Yes, attorneys are busy, but so many will still take that time for conversation. And we'll talk in a bit about how to show respect for their time, too.

ES: Another thing we hear is: "I just don't know what to say." I think you can help yourself here quite a bit by thinking about your game plan in advance. Develop a quick, short elevator pitch that introduces yourself, explains what you're interested in, and what you're hoping to get out of the networking conversation. This doesn't have to be a script, but the idea is to organize your thoughts, your "About Me" and "what I'm looking for."

JT: Another concern is: "I'm introverted," or "I hate talking to strangers." Effective networking means casting your net widely, and there is just no way

to entirely avoid talking to strangers or contacts you don't already know. However, to warm up, we recommend that you start with people that you *do* know. For 1Ls in particular, talk to upper-class students, faculty, your Public Service Leaders mentor, other folks within your network who are not strangers. That'll give you a chance to practice and refine your approach so that you will already have some muscle memory by the time you talk to someone new.

ES: Some people might also be tempted to think, "Networking with this person is a waste of time. They don't have a job for me!" I would say, remember that getting hired for a specific job opportunity is not the immediate goal of networking. Don't set yourself up for disappointment by assuming that you will walk out of a networking conversation with an offer in hand. If the person has an internship or job lead, that's a bonus, but what you're really looking for is advice, knowledge, intel, and more contacts. Remember – networking is relationship-building!

JT: So let's talk about how to actually go about networking. The first step is to start developing your contact list. Ask yourself -- who is doing the work that I want to be doing? That could mean people involved in a substantive area of law, or practicing somewhere you want to live. The goal is to identify people who can provide relevant information on your career interests, your job search, or who can refer you to other people who can.

Now, if you're saying, "I have zero people to add to my list! I don't know any lawyers; I don't have any lawyers in my family." Take advantage of HLS resources. For example, thinking about resources through OPIA -- there are the Heyman Fellows, a sizable cohort of alumni working in federal government. Wasserstein Fellows are practicing public interest attorneys who come to campus, who are eager and excited to talk to you about their own career path and help you navigate yours. There are Public Service Leader mentors. You can use the Amicus platform. You can talk to OPIA advisers to get additional alumni contacts and reach out to them.

And don't forget you can network with your classmates! Especially for 1Ls, think about reaching out to 2Ls and 3Ls with similar interests. They may only be a year or two ahead of you in law school, but they've already

navigated a public interest search. If you're interested in re-entry work, for example, you can bet there's a 2L or 3L who, as a 1L, developed a list of organizations doing re-entry work for their own internship search -- so you don't necessarily need to re-invent the wheel. There's Who Worked Where, a resource you can find on our website, that shows where past students have done their summer internships. There's the faculty! Professors, clinical faculty, they don't necessarily need to be professors you're taking classes with. Take a look at the faculty list and see who's doing work in areas interesting to you. Don't be discouraged if you only have a couple of people on your list at first because, again, each contact will direct you to more people, and your networking circle will keep expanding.

ES: So, the next step from there is to reach out. Send emails to these contacts and ask for a phone or Zoom meeting. OPIA has some sample emails on our website to help you think through how to approach this initial contact. We recommend, though it's not a requirement, attaching your resume – to help give a better idea of your background and experience. Where appropriate, mention a mutual acquaintance who referred you or how you learned about your contact. For example, “I participated in an eviction defense webinar where you were a panelist and I was really interested in the work that you're doing.” Also make sure that your contact understands that you're not looking for a job interview, but rather an opportunity to discuss your career and obtain some professional feedback. And, back to respecting folks' time – ask for a specific amount of time (such as 30 minutes) and stick to it. Be as flexible around their schedule as you can, and be conscious of time zone differences as well. We have more tips on etiquette, including email etiquette, in the Professionalism Guide on the OPIA website.

JT: OK, so from there, start thinking about how you want to direct the conversation. Read their bio; look at their organization website. Make sure you're not asking questions that are readily available on the Internet, like, “What is the mission of your organization? What are the different programs?” Ask questions that get to the heart of what you want to know. On our website, OPIA has a long list of potential questions you could ask during a conversation like this.

Once you get in the meeting, after spending a few minutes breaking the ice, it's really up to you to focus the conversation. You requested the meeting, so be prepared to lead it to a certain extent. But of course, this can evolve, and it's OK to let the conversation flow organically. At the end of the meeting, ask for referrals to other people who might be helpful. Again, this is how your network grows. After the conversation, add these contacts to a spreadsheet or some other form of tracking. I use an Excel sheet. List email addresses, phone numbers, dates you contacted them, results of the contacts – that can help you keep up to date. And definitely send a thank-you note within 24 hours.

ES: And one meeting doesn't have to end the conversation! Relationships don't build that way; they can evolve overtime. Some good times to follow up with your networking contact could be with updates on the status or the outcome of your job search, at the end of the school year or a semester, or when you're starting or ending an internship. Those are nice touchpoints, to just check in and say, for example, "I just completed this internship this summer, I really enjoyed it, I'm even more confident than I was when we spoke before that this is the area of law I'm interested in, and thank you again for taking the time to speak with me." You don't have to request a conversation every time you reach out to a contact. In fact, you shouldn't! But just providing them with an update will be helpful and keep you on their radar.

ES: Sometimes folks might feel like this is a little "bother-y" – I'm following up, but I don't need anything. All the better, that you're not necessarily asking for something! People get invested and interested. They want to know what happens in the future and they want to support your success. And there might be a way for them to plug back in as a resource for you going forward. "It's great to hear from you" might be the reaction you get to your email! That's how you build the relationship – keeping those folks updated and letting them know how they've impacted you.

JT: There are some other ways to network in addition to the one-on-one conversations we've talked about. You can join listservs, working groups, bar associations – these will provide some platforms for you to network with folks. A lot of bar associations have reduced or even free memberships for

law students.

JT: You can be active on social media, like LinkedIn and Twitter. Reach out to connections on LinkedIn, and check out “People You May Know” to find other people who share connections with you, and share your interests. Add a personal note to your connection request. On Twitter – I actually find, especially in the human rights space, where I came from prior to joining OPIA, Twitter is an amazing platform to build a network and also display your own expertise. Tweet about things going on in your sector. Post on a regular basis and use relevant hashtags so the right people will see them. You can follow hashtags that are important to you and your sector, and find thought leaders on your subject that way. Follow them, comment on their posts, retweet them – this is a natural way to break the ice and build that new connection.

ES: And, of course, attend OPIA’s virtual networking reception in the winter! This is a great built-in, ready-made opportunity for you to have one-on-one conversations with employers and alumni in a single evening. No cold emails required! Look out for information about that event on our website and in our email bulletins.

JT: So let’s sum up and wrap up! Final thoughts and things to remember. Think of networking as building relationships and getting to know your field – getting a job interview is not the immediate goal. Don’t be discouraged if your network is small at the beginning and you don’t have a lot of pre-law-school experience. Networking with faculty and other public interest students at HLS is networking! You are part of an amazing group of people; take advantage of the chance to get to know them. Each contact is going to direct you to more people, and your relationships will multiply. Keep track of those contacts, and using them in the future will help you increase your impact in your field.

ES: You can do this! If you need more guidance along the way, you know where to find us. Drop-ins!

JT: One-on-one appointments!

ES: The OPIA website!

JT: Reach out if you need us. Happy networking!