

What You Need to Know About Networking

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A few years ago, three college kids invented a popular Internet pastime that ultimately grew into a book and board game. It is based on the notion that Kevin Bacon is the center of the entertainment universe. The name of the game came from the movie *Six Degrees of Separation* and its theme is that everyone is connected to everyone else by no more than six degrees or steps. In the Kevin Bacon game, you can connect any actor in any American movie directly to Kevin Bacon. Have any of you played this game before?

Even Elvis Presley is connected by just two degrees, having starred in *Speedway* with Courtney Brown, who was in *My Dog Skip* with Kevin Bacon. I don't know how Kevin Bacon is connected with medical transcription, but I do know that the most successful MTs have built strong networking connections. Medical transcription students can get a jumpstart in the field by placing themselves at the center of their medical transcription universe and building as many connections to other MTs as possible. As an MT student, do you feel like you are starting out at the bottom?

Don't think of yourself as starting out at the bottom when you begin to build your network. What you are really doing is starting at the center and expanding out in all directions—like the Big Bang. You can start today to expand your medical transcription universe. Start by telling everyone you meet about your career plans. Think back to how you felt when you made the decision that medical transcription was the career for you. Whether you enrolled in a school or began a program of self-directed study, you were excited about the prospects that lay ahead. Perhaps you shared your excitement with your family and close friends. Now and then you may get bogged down in your studies and lose some of that initial enthusiasm. Here's where a network can help you regain your enthusiasm about the field.

Even if you don't know a single MT, I will share with you a way to build your MT network so that you have hundreds of MTs you can count on. Let's get back to sharing your enthusiasm. Who should you tell beyond family and friends? Neighbors, the parents of your children's friends, your hairdresser, your banker, your insurance agent, the cashier at the grocer's, the video store clerk, your mechanic—all can help you build your network if you just let them know you are a budding medical transcriptionist. When one of my former students mentioned her studies to a casual acquaintance at her church, she was surprised to hear, "Medical transcription? I think that's what my neighbor does. She can never get any help. Maybe I should get you two together." A few weeks later this student had her first job.

If you are asked what a medical transcriptionist does, explain the crucial role of the MT in creating the patient's healthcare record and ensuring continuity of care. If nothing else, you are

promoting understanding of the profession. But if it turns out that this person knows someone else in the business, don't hesitate to ask for a referral. Get a name and number. And then write it down. You probably all keep a notebook in which you keep track of terminology, but how many of you keep a **networking notebook**?

Networking contacts are quickly lost if you don't have a method for keeping track. Choose some method for managing your contacts. It doesn't matter if you use a Treo, iPhone, Blackberry, or a loose-leaf notebook. Record the date and the name of the person who referred you, including details of the interaction to jog your memory later on. This is especially useful when the referral is made by a friend of a friend whose neighbor's aunt is an MT. Always ask for both an e-mail address and a phone number, as contact information can change over time. Remember that you are building a network you will rely on for the length of your career. When you get in touch with a referral, make copious notes in your networking directory. This information will serve as conversation starters for subsequent followup calls.

In addition to personal networking contacts, devote a separate section in your networking directory to the names of businesses that employ MTs, cross-referencing back to your networking contacts as necessary. You can use this section to keep track of your interactions with prospective employers—resumés sent, calls made or received, interviews scheduled, tests returned, and so on. Even if you aren't planning on entering the job market for a while, regularly scan classified ads for MT-related positions and record the contact information for every possible employer. An employer that holds no particular appeal now may become a potential employer down the road and/or may serve as an important step (or degree) that connects you with your ideal job. If an ad lists only a phone number, call and find out who the employer is and what kind of work they do. If you are using a loose-leaf notebook, you can literally cut and paste the ads into your notebook. Record also any information you learn about potential employers on the Internet. If you wanted to find a group of MTs all in one place, where would you go?

Locating and attending a professional association meeting for MTs will expand your network exponentially. Of course, it isn't enough to just show up and sit quietly in the corner. If you are at a state or national meeting, sit next to people you don't know and introduce yourself. Ask people their names, where they live, and what type of transcription they do. Exchange business cards—and, yes, students can have business cards. You can print them yourself using card stock available at your local office supply store. When you are given a business card, use the back of it to jot down a note about the person you've just met. If you are meeting a large number of people who don't have business cards, take a break every so often and do some discrete notetaking.

On the local medical transcription chapter level, volunteer for whatever needs doing, or better yet, become a member so that you can have recurring contact with members. If there isn't a medical transcription association chapter in your area, contact AHDI (Association for Healthcare Documentation Integrity, www.ahdionline.org) to find out how you can help start one.

One student I know had no AHDI chapters in her whole state. Even though as a student she couldn't hold office, she played a crucial role in starting a state association. You don't need to

be a CMT. In fact, you can become a CMT without joining AHDI. But the benefit of membership is in the networking power it affords you. I know MTs all over the country precisely because I've met them at the AHDI annual meetings.

Now I'm going to share with you some secrets your mother or your MT teacher probably never told you about networking. If you've had little or no luck locating MTs or MT companies in your geographic area, you can root them out with some detective work. Get out the Yellow Pages and identify every possible employer of transcriptionists, starting with the obvious and working to the less obvious. Obvious employers are clinics and individual physician offices, hospitals, and medical transcription services. If you are in a metropolitan area, you may never actually finish prospecting contacts from this first phase—and let me point out that the process that I am describing can be used for job hunting later on, so pay close attention!

If you are in a sparsely populated area, work your way down to the less obvious employers:

- Ancillary hospital departments (radiology, cardiology laboratory, pathology lab, GI lab, emergency department)
- Specialty facilities (independent radiology and pathology labs, day surgery centers, sports medicine clinics, physical rehabilitation centers)
- Nursing services (visiting nurse associations, nurse practitioner offices, nursing homes, extended-care facilities)
- Mental health services (a wide range of individuals who perform counseling services and dictate intake reports and progress notes)
- Allied health services (physical therapists, occupational therapists, respiratory therapists, home IV and oxygen services, home healthcare services, paramedic/ambulance services)
- Dentists and dental surgeons
- Veterinarians
- Health insurance claims processing companies
- Public health departments
- Private health service agencies
- Private investigators

How to Prospect. In a previous online seminar, we talked about matching your current skill set—whatever it is—to a job opportunity that fits those skills. Now that you've made a list, start at the top with individual physician offices and small group practices. Pick a building that houses a large number of these offices (for your convenience) and go door to door. Give your name to the receptionist and ask to speak with someone in the medical transcription department.

If you get a blank, ask for the name of the individual or company that is transcribing their dictation. If they tell you their dictation is outsourced, introduce yourself as a medical transcription student and ask for the name and phone number of the entity performing the transcription. If you are refused, hand the person your business card and ask them to pass it on. Explain that you are a student completing a school assignment to network with local transcriptionists. (If you weren't expressively given this assignment in your class, ask your teacher for his or her bless-

ings; I can't think of a teacher who would refuse this request.) If the receptionist or manager doesn't seem anxious to help you make this connection, be prepared to play the mercy card, explaining how desperate you are to fulfill your assignment but just can't seem to connect with a real MT. With the right amount of earnestness, you will usually gain compliance. If this office is not using an MT (maybe they are handwriting all their patient records), leave your card and be sure to follow up with them later on.

Whether you are successful in getting a name of an MT, don't leave without asking for a referral in the same building, i.e., ask if they can give you the name of anyone else in the building who might help you. Medical office staff members in the same building often know each other and you may be able to obtain the name of an office manager or receptionist in another office. Be sure to thank the individual who helped you—thank him or her by name. And if you were speaking to someone other than the office manager, now is the time to ask for the manager's name, if you haven't previously done so. Make a graceful exit, head out to the hallway, and immediately make any notes that you didn't already capture. Then head to the office next door and begin your spiel with the name of the person in the other office, even if this isn't the office to which you were just referred.

Here is how you might start the conversation: "I was just talking to Carol in Dr. Svorak's office. Here is my situation. I'm a medical transcription student, . . . blah, blah." This may seem like a lot of work, but the payoff will be worth it if your local networking contacts are limited. In a three-story office building hosting 20 different medical practices, you can walk out after an hour or so with the names of a dozen MTs or MT companies who do transcription (unless a very clever MT service contracted with every doc in the building—which is okay, too, so long as you obtained that company's name).

If you are at or near the end of your formal education and have begun the job hunting process, you can use the same prospecting techniques to identify work opportunities, both through the individual contacts each office might yield but also with the offices you visited. I have seen this method used—and I've done it myself—to find accounts. But it also yields networking connections. Write everything down in your networking notebook. Telephone or e-mail each new contact right away, while the referral is fresh. This verifies that your contact information is valid while you still have the opportunity to obtain it again.

Let's say you are going to phone the MT who is the aunt of the neighbor of the friend of a friend. Begin the conversation by telling her your name, that you are also in the MT field, and that you got her number from her niece, who is a friend of a friend. Ask if she has a few minutes to talk, and if she does not, ask for a better time to call or an e-mail address she would prefer you use. You want to build a positive relationship so don't start off on the wrong foot by failing to respect her wishes. If she has time to talk, tell her you are still in school and were assigned to interview working MTs. Ask how she got started in the field, what she likes and doesn't like about her job or work environment, and what advice she would have for building networking contacts in the local industry. Ask her for contact info for other MTs in the area.

Keep the conversation short, thank her profusely for her time, and ask if there is an e-mail or postal address where you can send a thank-you note or any followup questions. Offer your e-mail address and give your name again (people quickly forget names given at the beginning of a conversation). End the interaction by suggesting that you hope you will have the opportunity to meet her some day. Take really good notes during the conversation, as something she tells you may serve as the perfect segue to a future contact later on.

Does anyone regularly follow up with networking contacts just for the purpose of forging a networking relationship? A woman in the San Diego AHDI chapter introduced herself to me at a meeting when I was working as a recruiter for a national service. She came up to me and said hello every time we ran into each other, and she told me where she was in her school program; she was just starting her education. Her friendly conversation was nice, and I was genuinely interested in hearing a happy story. She was always enthusiastic. I invited her to come test for me when she finished school; I told her I wanted first crack at her. And when she did finish school, I offered to test her and I did manage to find her an entry-level position. But what if I couldn't have done so? What if her skills just weren't what I needed? What if she was not a good match for the opportunities I had available?

You can turn a negative situation into a positive one. When you reach the end of your formal education and begin the process of job hunting, you will no doubt interview for positions for which you are not offered a job. The good news is that you can turn what might be an otherwise distressing situation into a networking opportunity. First, get over any distress you may be feeling. Not every available job is going to be a good match for every available MT (novice or experienced). If your skill set didn't match the work available at that particular institution, ask the interviewer for a referral to employers he might know that could offer a better match.

Whether you obtain an employer referral, make an effort to create a mentoring relationship with the interviewer. Ask for career advice. What is his frank assessment of your current skill set? What would he recommend you do next? How did he get his own start in the medical transcription field? Can you come back and try again at a later date? Send a thank-you note after every interview and let the interviewer know you appreciated his extra effort to provide you direction in your career. Include this person in your contact list and get in touch with him when your circumstances have changed. When I was recruiting MTs and spent a little time "counseling" an applicant I couldn't hire, I was glad to get a progress report from time to time and ultimately hired several applicants whom I had mentored in this way.

Here is another networking trick. When you are just starting out in school (or you can actually do it any time), contact local employers who hire MTs. If you can't find any local MT services or if the local hospitals are all outsourced), use the techniques mentioned above to locate a potential employer. MTSOs (medical transcription service organizations) can be found in the Yellow Pages under "medical transcription" or "secretarial services, medical." Call the employer and ask for an interview—not a job interview but a school assignment interview—and ask if they would be willing to test you as part of your "interview," so that you can get a

feel for what a real MT goes through when job hunting. Then ask the employer to tell you what they think. If you do really bad, you can point out that you just started school and haven't learned anything yet! If you do real well, take credit for being a quick study and having natural talent. Ask the employer for career advice, and ask if he or she would be willing to test you again when you finish school. This employer has now automatically become a mentor—someone interested in your career, someone willing to give you career advice.

Another tidbit. When you see an ad in the paper, if it is for a company in a metropolitan area, assume that the company has been deluged with applicants. Your resumé will definitely get tossed aside if not tossed right in the trash. Instead, wait about two weeks, give them time to process all the applicants and make their hiring decision. Then call when they are not actively advertising and ask if you can come in and talk, and perhaps have a “mercy test,” which is what I call the test I talked about above—one where you aren't expecting to get hired, just testing the waters.

One of my former students visited local MT employers prior to choosing a school program. She asked for a few moments of the manager's time to talk about the profession and get a recommendation on the local schools. The manager told her to come back when she was finished with school, and she did. The manager tested her and thought she did well, but she couldn't offer her a job since she had only a couple of desks reserved for novice MTs and had just hired two newbies; she didn't have the resources available to take on my student, too. But she thought to ask the manager for a referral. Did she know anyone who might hire her, might be able to offer an entry-level slot? The manager gave her the name of a woman who owned a small service and was a former employee of that office. My student went to see her, and the woman offered her a position. And just the same day, that first manager called her and said one of her trainees had quit so she now had space for my student. She actually got to choose between two job offers!

As your MT universe expands, your networking notebook will grow thicker and/or you may be needing to add memory to your PDA. So how will you use all this information? As with all networking contacts, they are most valuable when you need them. Before you send in a resumé, refresh your memory on what you already know about a particular employer. Use your networking directory to find someone who works for that company—or someone who knows someone who works for that company—and get in touch with that contact. Ask for the contact's opinion of the company, any advice she might give, and whether she can give you the name of someone in that company who might be able to help you secure an interview.

At other times you may truly need information that only an MT can provide. Before making a digital equipment purchase, I contacted several names from my own networking directory to find out who had purchased a similar type of equipment and whether or not they were satisfied with the purchase. One contact referred me to a friend of a friend, and I ended up in a very informative conversation with someone I would never otherwise have met and whose advice influenced my buying decision.

Work your contacts from time to time. You don't want the information to grow stale and out-of-date. E-mail is great for followup for both professional and personal contacts. For formal professional contacts, keep followup brief and to the point: an e-mail address update or to verify information. If your initial interview notes yielded personal information, your followup can be personal—an inquiry about a job change or other life event. This would be something on the order of “How is the new baby?” or “How do you like your new house?” kind of thing, if that kind of info came up in a casual conversation previously. That's why you write everything down: names of kids, birthday; any info that gets shared, you write it down. For example, my birthday is on the last day of the month. If I got a birthday e-mail, I'd be likely to remember that person's name.

It isn't just one contact that cements a relationship, but several over a period of time. You get to feeling that you know someone, even if only in a virtual sense. Be sure to pass along information about the progress of your own career, especially if a contact expressed interest here. And when you do get the opportunity to interact with a group of MTs, challenge them to the Kevin Bacon game, and determine how many degrees separated each of you before your encounter.

I have talked with a student MT several times about software issues in the last 18 months; it had been perhaps a year since I last talked with her. She phoned me yesterday to ask about advanced training—which direction she should go for her circumstances. Her sister is an MT and working as a subcontractor for a woman in San Diego. We talked about the expected workload, type of accounts, what she would need to know. It occurred to me to ask her the name of the employer (I told her I used to be from San Diego) but I didn't recognize the woman's name. But then half an hour later I got a phone call from this student's sister. It turns out that the sister who now lives in Colorado used to live in San Diego and used to sit right next to me at an MT service I worked for years ago. It is a very, very small MT world, and you can quickly grow your own network until you soon feel that you know everybody. Of course, there will still be more people out there, but the more people you know, in person and on line, the more likely you are to find yourself in the right place at the right time to find that right job.

Question and Answer Section

Q: Is it perfectly okay to use e-mail as a form of communication when prospecting for a job?

A: It is. You can send around your resumé and you can send inquiries. Remember that as a novice MT, no matter how strong your skills are, you are still considered a newbie when you are measured against an MT with years of experience, and rightly so. We continue to learn on the job, and experienced MTs have heard thousands more dictating voices, encountered many thousands of different types of reports, diagnoses, and ways dictators say things. They have a much shorter learning curve on a new account and for the most part don't need to be proofed as much. New MTs are also a valuable commodity in the workplace. A survey of 60 supervisors

at an AHDI meeting a couple of years ago showed that all but two had hired newbies, in spite of a published no-newbie policy. Everyone hires new MTs; they just don't publicize it or they will be overrun with new MTs! The trick is to be there when an opportunity is available. You have the best chance of being there, of knowing about an opening where a newbie can fill the spot if you know a lot of people in the industry.

Q: Could you suggest an example of what to say when calling an MT service to forge a networking connection or to get a job interview or test?

A: First, before I applied, I'd use my networking connections to learn everything I could about the employer and whether they have hired newbies in the past, what kind of work they do (is it all foreign accents and acute care or would they have something more entry level?). How do they pay? What kind of test and interview will there be? If I couldn't get an inside track from my networking connections (a name of someone to ask for), I'd try going in the "front door" first. That means calling and asking for an interview. If you run into a screener (a receptionist who starts the conversation with "How many years experience? Sorry, we don't want you."), you can get around this person by calling at lunch time or after 5 p.m.; that is when a manager is most likely to be working late and sometimes answers the phone.