# Guide to Starting a Job Search Support Group

*Grouping for Job Search Support in Today’s Down Economy*

By Janice Lee Juvrud and Terrence H. Seamon

Networking groups have been around for over a hundred years. Rotary Clubs began in the early 1900’s. Women’s Clubs formed during the late 1800s. While the primary goal of such groups was service to others, you can be sure that relationships formed benefited everyone involved.

So what’s new? Due to the economic calamity unfolding since last year (2008), with huge job losses and downsizings, the primary goal of networking has become finding a job and helping others find a job. This has created an interesting surge in micro-groups: small, local, often church-based groups, started in many cases by people who are themselves looking for work, staffed by committed volunteers, operating on tiny or zero budgets, but with hearts overflowing with concern for others.

We are part of this movement. We are members of such groups. (See our brief bios at the end of this article)

Knowing that many of these groups are quite young, and knowing that many more are about to pop up like mushrooms, we gathered together the following wisdom. Think of this as a set of guidelines we hope will be helpful to you when you join, or start, a local support group. Let us know if this helps you. Our contact info is at the end.

**GUIDELINES TO CREATE JOB SEARCH SUPPORT GROUPS**

**Purpose**

First things first, right? Why do you want to form yet another job search support group? Don’t get us wrong: we are NOT trying to talk you out of it. Rather, we want you to think first, then decide.

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| **Types of Groups** |
| Surveying the many groups that are out there, we have identified several “types,” and offer the following as a way to think about your purpose.  **Networking** Groups: The primary focus of such groups is networking, i.e., providing gatherings designed for connecting with other people for the purpose of expanding your network.  **Job Leads** Groups: The primary focus of such groups is sharing job leads, typically around a specific industry sector such as HR.  **Accountability** Groups: The primary focus of such groups is mutual support of the members through weekly reporting on progress.  **Job Search Skills** Groups: The primary focus of such groups is training and reinforcement on the essential skills for conducting an effective job hunt, including writing a resume, writing cover letters, preparing for interviews, building a network, etc.  In reality, many groups are blends of the above types. |
| **Some Points About Groups** |
| Bringing people together for a support group during a job search can reduce the stress and feelings of isolation that come with being “in transition.” In some cases, being part of a group actually helps to make job search a positive experience. In the best of circumstances, new friendships are forged.  But, before we go further, there are some things to keep in mind about groups. Anytime a group comes together around a common goal, you get “group dynamics.” In other words, you get some very predictable forms of human behavior that occur in groups. Here are a few of special relevance to the early stage of group formation.  What’s Going On Here? – Have you ever been in a small group and suddenly people are asking questions like, “Who put her in charge?” “I didn’t agree to that. How did that happen?” “Every meeting he’s talking about everything except what’s important.” “Would you please get him to stay on topic?”  How Do I Fit In? - When new to a group, we are figuring out if we fit. Once we decide we fit, our attention turns to concerns about leadership, decision-making, distribution of power, procedures. You’re thinking, “Am I comfortable with my level of power, responsibility and influence?”  Can I Be ‘Me’ Here? - Once fit and compatibility are ‘settled’ for me, the question is, How open do I want to be in this group? Shall I be open and express my feelings or shall I keep my relationships superficial and task-oriented? Can I find a comfortable middle ground?  Who’s In Charge? - There is an inclination for small groups to come together without a leader thinking that equal participation and responsibility is appropriate for a group of accomplished professionals. However, a leader can provide direction and focus to support the group’s purpose and mission. Setting a caring, positive tone goes a long way to contain anxiety common for those in search. This will minimize the possibility of a stress in the group and increase the likelihood of successful landings for each group member.  How Much Am I Willing to Commit To This Group? – Because this group is a volunteer activity, each group member is thinking some variation of the commitment question. The success of the group hinges on the commitment of the members.  A common question is, “Am I required to attend every meeting?”  These questions, and others in the early phases of becoming a group, occur naturally even if you’re not aware of it.  Our suggestion - Balance your awareness between the Task (your goal) you have set for yourselves, with the Relationships (variables mentioned above). Both are going on simultaneously in the group. Both interact. Your group experience will be more enjoyable and successful when the relationships are strong and productive. |

**COMPONENTS TO CONSIDER WHEN FORMING YOUR GROUP**

**Design Team**

When thinking of starting a group, chances are you are collaborating with one or more friends or colleagues. Collectively, you all are the Design Team! Whether you realize it or not, you are designing the blueprint, so to speak, for an organization to become a successful support group that will help many people.

**Mission**

One of the first things to work out is your Mission: What do you want your group to do, and Who will you do it for?

**Scope**

After Mission, the most important early decision is about the boundaries around your group and its activities: What will you do and What will you NOT do.

Another common concern is about the boundary between sharing the personal strains of being in transition vs. keeping to the task of finding a job.

**Note about Mission and Scope**: While these are among the earliest decisions you’ll make, once made, they are not over. Both will continually evolve as members and experiences change.

**Values**

There are many groups like yours already operating in the greater NY, NJ, PA and CT area. What will distinguish yours? Some focus on networking. Some dedicate themselves to the skills of the job search. Some that are church-based make an explicit link to their sponsor; for example, the St Matthias Employment Ministry in Somerset NJ says “You may be the answer to someone’s prayers.”

**Name Your Group**

Agree on a name for the group that conveys the purpose of your group. This will support your outreach efforts, will help to attract people with similar goals of your group and attract folks who are more likely to fit in with the group.

**Location**

Another decision to tackle early on is: Where will your group be located? Will you have a home base? Will you float?

**OnLine Component**

In today’s wired world, may groups also have an online component or meet exclusively online such as a Yahoo group where job leads are posted, as well as notices about events like job fairs, workshops, webinars, conferences, etc.

**Schedule**

When will you meet? Will yours be a regular recurring meeting, e.g. every second Saturday morning?

**Outreach**

Depending on several variables: the size, type and longevity of your group; it may be important to have plans for outreach efforts. Consider outreach upfront as you clarify your purpose and mission.

**Show Me the Money**

Chances are if your group is like most others, you are operating in a zero budget situation. Still, ask yourselves, what kinds of things would you like to offer your future members? Might you want to offer coffee? Water? Bagels? In the future, would you want to invite a guest speaker? If you do, you might want to give them an honorarium of some modest amount.

**Creating the Right Mix of Members**

Look at your Design Team. Do you have enough people to launch this group? If you need additional people, think about the sorts of skills, personalities and work experience of folks you want to work with. Later, once you are up-and-running, you may want to invite subject matter experts to be guest speakers from time to time.

**People Will Come and Go**

Though we may seem out-of-place to mention this here, be ready for turnover. It’s natural. Things change in the lives of your members. Some will drop out. You’ll be sorry to see them go, but bid them farewell. And leave the door open for their return.

On the flip side, once your group gets going, others will want to join you. While it’s exciting when a prospective member is interested in your group, be thoughtful about who to include. Suggest they come to one of your meetings to see meet everyone. This will give the group and prospective member the opportunity to determine fit.

**Getting Started**

Sooner or later, with all the planning you’ve been engaged in, you’ll need to launch. It’s exciting. It’s also scary. Who will show up? How needy will they be? Will you be able to help them?

**Learning Fast**

Because many other groups have arrived on the scene before yours, you do not have to reinvent the wheel. In fact, a good way to learn fast is to find an ongoing group or two and meet with them. Ask questions. Pick their brains. Find out what pitfalls they encountered. Ask them,What works?

**Getting Feedback**

After your debut event, and then periodically, it’s important to check in with group members for feedback. Is the group helping them? Do they feel they can contribute? What do they like? Dislike? What programming would they like to see?

**Renewing**

As your first year of operation comes to a close, it’s important to take stock of what you have experienced, what went well, what did not go so well, what you learned, and what you’ll do differently next year. Take time to celebrate. Plan a retreat just for the team.

**The Authors**

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