

The Stow Independent... *Online*

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“Networkers” Get the Job Done

By Ann Needle

One local group has proven that out of work does not mean out of luck. Since it formed in 2002, Acton Networkers can claim that about 12,811 job seekers have come through the group’s e-mail list in the past decade, with a current membership of 2,156.

The group formed in the wake of 9/11’s sluggish market — especially in high tech — combining five separate church groups for job-hunters in the area with members of a Yahoo e-mail distribution list. The name came about when one of these churches, St. Matthew’s United Methodist in Acton, became the main meeting site. Today, the group is even listed as a resource in the Riley Guide job seekers’ site, at <http://www.rileyguide.com/support.html>.

About 25 members started that first AN group, sharing “needs and leads” with each other, and working on job-hunting skills and market research. The founders came from St. Isidore’s Church, Acton’s Mount Calvary Lutheran Church, St. Matthew’s United Methodist Church, First Parish Unitarian Universalist in Concord, and Our Lady of Fatima Church, Sudbury.

Network co-founder Craig Schomp of Stow spoke recently of why, though working full-time now, he remains deeply involved with a group that shepherded him through one of life’s toughest times.

Schomp began his story with being laid off from a start-up one week after 9/11. Soon after, Schomp formed a networking group at St. Isidore’s, with about five members. He also attended a few other church-based networking meetings in the area, all of them small groups that traded leads and tips in job searching.

After Schomp created a job-seekers group on Yahoo, the church groups agreed to combine in March 2002, launching alongside Schomp’s Yahoo list.

The “Kimball’s Challenge”

Schomp noted that trading contacts and tips has been just a piece of what Acton Networkers has helped accomplish for clients. There also have been job-hunting exercises formed by the group, including what Schomp described as the “Kimball’s Challenge”.

Chatting at a visit to Kimball’s Ice Cream in Westford, Schomp explained that a few of the members were discussing how to handle the ongoing challenge of digging their resumes out of the apparent black holes that suck them away when sent to companies, especially high-tech firms. “So, we told people to put on a suit, knock on the door [of the desired company] and come back and report to us,” he said.

Out of work from high tech for a year, Schomp recalled how he took himself up on his own challenge when his unemployment compensation ran out. After spotting a help wanted ad for a salesperson at a local Volkswagen dealership, Schomp said he knocked on



Acton Networkers founders from left to right: Mike Berg, Mount Calvary Lutheran Church Acton; John Nicholson, Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Parish Sudbury; John Nitzke, St. Matthew’s United Methodist Church Acton; Craig Schomp, St. Isidore’s Catholic Parish Stow; Paul Gaboury, First Parish Unitarian Universalist Concord
Courtesy Photo

the dealer's door, rather than chance sending in a resume that did not list any related experience.

When the dealership asked Schomp what made him think he could sell cars, Schomp told them, "Every time my boy sees a Bug [VW Beetle] on the road, he punches his sister. If you have that sort of brand recognition in my family, it should be easy."

He smiled, "At the end of three months, I was the top guy in the dealership."

Schomp also credits the personal skills learned from AN in helping him land his current job as a lead software engineer at Egenera Inc. When Egenera was in its start-up days, he recalled, "They had no jobs, none." But that did not stop Schomp from contacting the company and offering to write some software on how he would manage one of Egenera's products. Egenera took Schomp up on his offer of a demonstration. It was this demo that Schomp credits with putting him ahead of the pack when a job did open up, leading to his being hired.

"What we realized is your qualifications are only part of the story. You need face time," said Schomp. "If you make a connection, it pushes the resume right to the top."

And, as the Kimballs' visit proved, just having a group to rely on can make a difference.

As Co-Founder Paul Gaboury explained, "When you're out of work, one of your worst enemies is too much time on your hands. AN gave me an opportunity to invest some of that time into helping people by providing them with resources and connections and all of the tools I didn't get from the executive outplacement firm I passed through." He added, "Seeing how it has evolved is both sad and gratifying — sad that the economy still has so many people in need, but gratifying that AN is there to help."

Schomp noted, "I know it works, because the unemployment office sends people to us."

AN lists its meetings on its web site, at <http://www.ActonNetworkers.org>. Anyone from any profession is welcome. To get onto AN's Yahoo e-mail list, those interested must attend at least one meeting.

The price of membership is cheap —everyone chips in for coffee at the meetings, according to Schomp. "There is a standing tradition that anyone who did get a job with help should stop by, share their story, and bring donuts. I don't think a meeting has been without donuts since its founding."

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