The ART of NETWORKING

Your whole life is shaped by the people you know



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Why I'm handing you this

Let me be straight with you right out of the gate, because I'm always straight with the executives I work with. They want it that way, and I think you will too.

You didn't get to where you are by accident. Look at your career. Look at the path you took. It's a real accomplishment, and I'm not going to spend this book telling you everything you did wrong. But I am going to tell you one thing you probably never learned to do well, and it's the one thing that will have the biggest impact on your career.

You never learned to network. Not really.

Oh, you've got a LinkedIn profile. You've got a stack of business cards somewhere. You've sent a thousand "first connections" over the years to people you never spoke to again. But nobody ever taught you the actual craft of it: how to take thirty or forty years of relationships and turn them into the most reliable, recession-proof engine a career can have.

That's what this book is about. It's my story, and it's what I've learned teaching this to thousands of executives. It's not a manual. I'm not going to hand you every nut and bolt. It's the art of it, from a high level.

And here's the thing I want you to understand: you have been doing this your whole life — you just didn't know it. Let me show you.

PART ONE

The Belief

CHAPTER ONE

The Kid from the Southern Tier

I grew up in a small town in the Southern Tier of New York State. Less than twelve thousand people. The kind of place nobody's heard of unless they grew up there. The closest major city was Rochester, hardly a metropolis. My mom was a schoolteacher. My dad worked a bunch of different jobs over the years and was a heck of an athlete. We were a middle-class family, right in the middle of that community, and money was tight, because most of what came in came from a teacher's salary.

So from the time I was little, I wanted more. Not in an extravagant way. I just wanted to be able to buy things, do things, and I knew nobody was going to hand them to me. As long as I can remember, I always had a job — I'd be up before sunrise for my paper route or other odd jobs. But one job really sticks out. Because my mother was a teacher, I was able to secure a job at the school bus garage over the summer, and one of my first tasks was to drive a sixty-passenger school bus. A stick shift. And there were these hills where I was so scared of the clutch that when a car came the other way, I'd stop the bus, get out, and wait for them to pass so I wouldn't have to work the clutch on the incline. Then I'd climb back in and keep going.

Welcome to a small town.

But the thing that really made me who I am was sports. From the day I was born I had a ball in my hand. Soccer, basketball, tennis. And every one of them taught me something I still live by.

Soccer was a big deal in our town. I was the captain. We won sectional championships, we went to states. Basketball, I was the point guard, the captain again, the guy leading everything, running the team. I played with the same five guys from fifth grade all the way through graduation. That's a brotherhood. You learn how to lead people, how to manage a team, how to get the most out of a group of people who are all different.

And then there was tennis. That one's different. On a tennis court, there's no team. It's just you. Three sets to figure it out, all by yourself, and nobody's coming to save you. I got recruited for all three sports out of high school, but tennis was the one. I think I lost three matches from seventh grade to twelfth. And I'll never forget playing the wealthy kids up in Rochester who had five or six rackets in their bag, and I'd show up with one new racket and one beat-up old one, because that's what we could afford. And I'd beat them.

Years later, I was inducted into my hometown's Sports Hall of Fame. I don't say that to brag. I say it because it's one of the honors I'm proudest of, and because it's a reminder that everything I learned about leading, competing, and doing it myself started on those fields and courts back home.

So here's what I got out of all of it, and I didn't understand it until years later. The team sports taught me how to lead and how to lean on other people. And tennis taught me the opposite: that at the end of the day, there's no one else out there who can do this for you. You have to do it yourself. I've spent my whole life living in both of those truths at once, and so will you if you want to network the right way.

There's one more person I have to tell you about, because he shaped everything. When I was in seventh or eighth grade, I was good enough at soccer that they let me play in the adult league.

And one of the men I met there was a guy named Tom. Nine years older than me, came from a family that owned a very successful business. We started golfing together, and Tom became my idol.

Not because he was rich (although he was). Because you'd never have known it. He was the kindest, calmest, most fun person you ever met. He'd fly to Florida to go barefoot skiing, he'd drive his IROC Camaro and say "let's double the corner in speed," he was always building something. And through all of it he had this calm about him. Everything's going to work out. Everything's going to be okay.

Now, Tom never sat me down and taught me lessons. That wasn't him, and I want to be clear about that. He didn't hand me a list of rules. But because of him, because of the way he carried himself and lived his life, I came away with three things that I've built my whole life around ever since, and that I now try to live by and pass on to my kids and everybody who works for me. Be passionate about what you do. Work harder than everyone else in the room. And be kind. Tom didn't teach me those; he just *was* those things, and watching him, I picked them up.

Hold onto those three. They're going to come back.

CHAPTER TWO

Somebody Always Knew Somebody

Here's a statistic I'm going to repeat so many times in this book you'll be able to say it in your sleep: **ninety percent of roles are filled by somebody knowing somebody.**

Executives hear that and they nod. Sure, Kurt, at the executive level, of course. But then I say, let me walk you back through your entire life, and watch what happens.

Let me walk through mine.

I went to RIT, one of the top engineering schools in the country. A small-town kid, surrounded by the best young engineers from all over the world. I was excited, proud, and scared out of my mind. My first term I took a Fortran class that started with a hundred people and ended with about twenty. That's how fast it taught me about competition. And I'll be honest with you. I was not the smartest person in that building. Not close. What got me through college was that I surrounded myself with people who were smarter than me. My fraternity brothers, the guys on my floor, my friends in mechanical engineering. That's the truth. Network, network, network. I just didn't have a word for it yet.

Then came the jobs. And I want you to watch the pattern, because the pattern is the whole point.

Actually, it started before I even graduated. One of my co-op jobs at RIT was at Tom's company (yes, the same Tom, my idol from those adult-league soccer days). His company built truck

bodies and highway dump bodies, and he brought me on as an engineer. It was the first time I ever got my hands on real CAD — computer-aided design, the software engineers use to draft and model parts on a screen, doing actual drafting and designing real parts. And how did I land it? Because I knew Tom. My very first taste of my own profession came from a relationship. That's no coincidence. It's how careers actually start. Even in college, the jobs come from who you know.

My first job out of school in 1995 was with a company called AMP down in Harrisburg, an elite rotational program for engineers. How did I get it? AMP had a relationship with RIT. That's why they came and hired us. It wasn't a job posting. It was a relationship.

A year and a half later I moved back to Rochester. My girlfriend Terri, now my wife, had gotten a teaching job, and I needed work. I'd gotten good at a piece of 3D design software, and along the way I'd built a relationship with an application engineer from the company that made it, PTC. He told me they had an office in Rochester looking for someone. I got the job. Network again. Not a posting. A relationship.

At PTC I learned I loved to sell, and I learned I was better at it than a lot of the sales guys who were making double my money. So I made a jump that terrified my mother. A sales guy I knew had a best friend who owned an engineering recruiting firm, and I went and met with the owners. I left a seventy-five-thousand-dollar job for fifteen hundred a month and a hundred percent commission. My mom was in a panic: you went to school for engineering, you've got loans, and you're going to straight commission? But I believed in myself, and I walked in the first day and told the owners, "Tell me exactly what to do. I want to make money as fast as I can."

They said, cold-call these leads. So I went into the conference room, closed the door, and made a hundred and fifty calls a day. My first twelve months I made a hundred and twenty grand.

And then there was Dell. Nobody at the firm was working with Dell, because nobody could get in. So I said, let me try. I hammered the phones until I got to this gatekeeper, a guy clearly at the tail end of his career, and he beat me up until he finally said, fine, go find me a BIOS engineer. Which back then was about the hardest role you could ever recruit. Two weeks later I found him one. They hired the guy.

And here's the part I love. That same gatekeeper who'd beaten me up on the phone? Once I delivered, we got to know each other, and before long we weren't talking about roles at all. We were talking about his tomato plants. The man loved gardening tomatoes, and we'd spend our calls on it. If you'd heard how he treated me the very first time I called, you would never in a million years have guessed the two of us would end up swapping tomato tips. That's what relationships are. And that one turned into over two million dollars in revenue. Dell is what carried me through the dot-com crash in 2000, while other firms were going under.

You see it, right? Every single rung of that ladder. Not one of them was a job board. Every one was somebody knowing somebody. Even coming out of college. Even at twenty-five.

In April of 2000, my colleague Mike and I took a deep breath and started our own firm, Global Network Recruiting. We were the top two producers where we worked, so when we left, they didn't take it well, and we had lawyers on us right away. Scary times. But it worked. And over the next fifteen years we grew it into a global executive recruiting firm.

So when I tell you ninety percent of roles come from somebody knowing somebody, I'm not reading you a study. I'm reading you my life. And if you're honest, it's yours too.

CHAPTER THREE

What Networking Is Not

Now let me tell you what most people do with that truth. Nothing.

They nod along (of course it's who you know) and then they go update their resume. They go to a job board. They pay somebody to rewrite two pages of their life. And I always ask them the same question: how is that being innovative?

You've been completely innovative in your job. Your whole career, you've adapted, you've solved problems nobody had solved, you've stayed ahead. So why, the second you need to find your next thing, you do the exact same stuff everybody did twenty years ago? Updating your resume? You could've done that in 1995. LinkedIn's been around since 2003. Job boards since 1998. None of that is innovative. None of it.

Let me be blunt about the two places everybody wastes their time.

Job boards are the ten percent. That's it. If ninety percent of roles come from somebody knowing somebody, then the job board is fighting over the other ten. And with the way it works now (the flood of applicants, the AI on both sides, hundreds and hundreds of people hitting apply), you should honestly lower the bar of expectations. I tell executives there are really only two reasons to ever answer a job posting: you know somebody at the company, or you come from a direct competitor. Otherwise you're a face in a crowd of a hundred million.

Recruiters are the same ten percent, unless somebody actually knows you. And here's something a lot of people don't

understand, so let me say it plainly, because I am one: executive recruiters get paid by their clients, not by their candidates. My job is not to find you a job. So when somebody cold-calls you promising to go out and find you a role for a fee, be careful. It's hard enough for me to do that, and I do it every single day.

Here's the disconnect that drives me crazy, and it might be the single biggest problem in this whole market. Because it isn't really two problems. It's one person who's forgotten they're the same person.

Put your hiring-manager hat on for a second. When you need to fill a role on your team, what do you actually do? You look internal first. Then you go to your own network: who do I know, who do my people know, who can vouch for someone? And only as a last resort, reluctantly, do you go find a total stranger, because a stranger is nothing but risk. You don't know them, you can't trust them yet, and you're betting your team on a resume. In fact, the very last thing you want to do is call an executive recruiter like me, because I'm bringing you people you've never met. You know all of this in your bones. When's the last time you hired an executive for your team off a job board? You haven't.

And here's how strongly I believe this, from my side of the desk. When a company hires me to fill a role and I don't already know them, the first questions out of my mouth are: Have you looked internal yet? Have you tapped your own network? If the answer is no, I tell them to go do that first and call me back. Because after decades of this, I know that whoever they already know is going to beat anyone I bring them. I'm the ten percent, and even I send them to the ninety first. And if they've truly exhausted both and still can't fill it, my next question is a careful one: why? Sometimes there's a perfectly good reason. But sometimes it tells me something's wrong in there. And that's a risk

I'd want to understand before I got involved. Hold that thought, because it applies to you, too.

Now take the hat off and become the candidate. And watch what happens: you do the exact opposite of everything you just knew to be true. You reach out to your ten or fifteen closest people, sure. But then you sprint straight to the job boards and the recruiters, as if the ten percent is somehow the fast lane to a great role. You've completely forgotten what you know as a hiring manager: that nobody good gets hired that way. Including by you.

And it shows up in every frustration people bring me. "My age is holding me back." Okay. When's the last time *you* hired a sixty-year-old? "I've changed jobs a lot, and I keep having to explain it." Of course you do. You're explaining it to strangers who don't know you, and they're sitting there trying to figure out whether it was the company's fault or yours. "I was at one company for thirty-five years, and now they act like I can't adapt." Be honest: if you were the hiring manager staring at a stranger's thirty-five-year resume, wouldn't you wonder the same thing? Every one of those is the disconnect. The candidate is furious about the exact things the hiring manager (the same person) would be cautious about.

So here's what I need you to sit with. The hiring manager and the candidate are the same human being, and right now they are a million miles apart. Until that gap closes, the ten percent is going to be brutal, and no resume, no cover letter, no AI tool is going to fix it. But you don't have to wait for the world to change. You can just stop fighting in the arena you'd never hire from, and go where you'd actually go as a hiring manager: to the people you know, and the people they know. Be the candidate you would want to hire.

None of this is meant to depress you. It's meant to free you. Because once you stop pouring your time into the ten percent, you can pour it into the ninety. And the ninety is sitting right there in your phone, in your email, in thirty years of people you've already met.

But before I show you how, I want to take you inside the two traps that swallow all that wasted time. Because until you really see them for what they are, you'll keep going back. Let's start with the one that feels the most productive: the job board.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Candy Store

I already told you the job board is the ten percent. Now I want to take you inside one, because until you really see what's going on, you'll keep going back to it. It's just like a candy store — everything looks so good from the outside, but once you get in and see the prices, the calories, all the junk, you realize it's really not that good for you. Everybody does. No matter who you are, at some point you're going to sit down and search the job boards. So let's be honest about it.

It starts with two mistakes I watch executives make every single time.

The first one is this: you don't study how to find a role. You just go look for one. Think about how strange that is. You're an executive. If you were starting a new position tomorrow, you'd study that role for weeks before you made a single big decision: the company, the people, the market, the process. You'd never wing it. And yet the second you need to find your next thing, you do zero research on how to actually do it. The truth nobody says out loud: nobody is an expert at looking for a job. Nobody. But the moment we start looking, we act like we are.

The second mistake is that we get completely fixated on deliverables. The resume. The LinkedIn profile. The cover letter. We pour our time and our money and our anxiety into two pages. But look back on your whole career and tell me honestly: did you ever succeed because you had a beautiful resume? Of course not. Roles don't come from deliverables. They come from the process

you choose. And here's the part people miss: when you choose a job board, you're choosing a process. That's all it is: a process. So the only question that matters is, is it the best one? If ninety percent of roles are filled by somebody knowing somebody, is a job board the best way to get to that? You already know the answer.

Now, I'm not saying job boards were never any good. When they came out in the late nineties, they were the greatest thing going: fresh, new, exciting. But that was almost thirty years ago. Now they're saturated. There are hundreds of millions of people in North America with access to those boards, and every one of them can hit apply. And I need you to really hear this: it does not matter how good your resume is. It does not matter how perfect your cover letter is, or how much money you spent on some AI tool to polish it. None of that changes the fact that hundreds (often a thousand or more) of people are applying to the same posting you are, and a hot remote role can hit a thousand applicants within days of going up.

The fantasy that keeps people stuck is this. When you're on a job board, you believe that posting is how the company is filling the role. It's not. Remember the number. Ninety percent of the time, that company is hiring somebody internal, or somebody they know. They're interviewing people from their own network. They're chasing referrals from colleagues. And if they've hired a recruiter like me, we're going straight at every competitor and every relevant company in the country. The posting is the smallest door in the building, and it's the one you're all lined up at.

Let me give you a real example, because this is what actually happens on my side of the desk.

A while back I was hired by one of the best supermarkets in the world to find a VP of Software Engineering to lead all of their

software development. This was the spot they were in. The bread and butter of a supermarket is brick and mortar, the store itself. But the whole game now is digital: how do you compete in a world Amazon dominates? And they had a very specific worry: the reason people love the place is the culture, the experience of walking through those doors. How do you move into the digital world without losing that? So they needed someone who had already lived that exact transition, from brick and mortar to digital.

Now here's the detail that tells you everything. At this company, about ninety-nine percent of roles (executive roles included) are filled internally. They almost never go outside. This was one of the rare times they did, because they needed a specific kind of experience they didn't have in-house. And even then, even when one of the best companies in the world decides to look outside, do you think they slapped up a job posting and waited to see who applied? Of course not.

My team and I went and researched every major retailer in the country: the ones who'd already made that leap from brick and mortar to digital. REI. Sephora. Walmart. Dick's Sporting Goods. On and on. And we pulled every single director, senior director, VP, SVP, EVP, and CIO of software development at every one of them. That's what LinkedIn lets us do now: search the entire country, every organization. By the time we were done, we had a list of more than three hundred people, all from the biggest players in retail.

And we filled the role with one of them. One, out of more than three hundred of the most qualified people in the country. So let me ask you honestly: if that's how it actually works, what are the odds you're the one who lands that job by submitting to a posting? It's the lottery.

And it has only gotten harder, which is the part nobody tells you. I've been doing this more than twenty-five years, and it is the hardest it has ever been to land a role through an executive recruiter: precisely because we have so much talent to choose from. Twenty years ago there were so few executives available that when I found a great one, I'd go and market that person to my clients. Today I've got three hundred people from directly relevant companies for a single opening. So the company gets to hold out for the purple squirrel — the mythical hire who checks every single box — and be honest, as the hiring manager, you would too, if you could see everyone. On that search we didn't tap ten percent of the market, or twenty. We reached about ninety-five percent of every person on earth who could do that job. They hired an absolute rockstar. And a couple of years later, she was promoted to CIO of the entire company. That's the caliber of person standing between you and a job posting.

And going outside like that was high risk for them, too. Nobody in that stack of three hundred was someone they actually knew. It's why it took months, and why they had to sit through a dozen finalists before they felt safe.

And that word, risk, is the part nobody talks about, and it cuts both ways.

Think about what you're actually doing when you take a job off a job board, from people you've never met. You're walking into a company full of strangers, and you will not know if it's a good place until you're already inside and you start meeting people. I could give you a thousand examples of executives who got in the door and discovered something was wrong: with the product, with the boss, with the culture. So here's the question I want you to ask before you ever chase one of these: if ninety percent of roles are filled by somebody knowing somebody, why

is this company going outside to fill it? Sometimes there's a perfectly good reason. But sometimes there's something wrong. And you'd better qualify that before you sign, not after. Because at this point in your career, is the goal just to find a job? Or is it to find something you'd actually love to do?

And remember the candy store: every one of those shiny postings in the window is a job somebody couldn't fill from their own network. That should make you curious, not excited.

The thing that should reframe all of it is this. As you get older, this is supposed to get easier, not harder. Good salespeople in their fifties aren't cold-calling all day like they were at twenty-five: they're living off referrals and relationships and reputation. Your career should work exactly the same way. More opportunities should be coming to you, and better ones, because you know more people. But the second you walk into a job board, you throw all that away and put yourself right back in the twenty-five-year-old's shoes: cold and unknown in a crowd of strangers.

So I'm not telling you to never look at a job board. I'm telling you it should be ten percent of your time, not ninety. And when you do it, lower the bar of expectations. And, this is important, stop being so emotional about it.

You're an executive. You are not this emotional at work. But the second we become candidates, we lose it. We get hurt when people don't respond, when applications vanish, when a recruiter goes quiet. Let me tell you something from the other side. Do you know how many times my team has emailed a group of executives, had them say "yes, I'm interested," and then sent fifteen messages to schedule a time and never heard back? Do you know how many execs have told me on the phone they'd send me their resume, and then I text them ten times and get nothing? It's

not personal. It's business. People are busy. So stop making your job search personal, and start running it the way I run mine: by the statistics.

Because you and I actually have the same goal. My job is to find roles and fill them. Your job is to find a role you want to fill. Same game. The difference is I don't get emotional about it. I run on statistics. And the statistics tell me most of my opportunities come from maintaining my network. So I don't spend my days combing job boards to see who's got an opening. I spend them keeping my VP and C-suite relationships strong and communicating with them consistently, all year, because I know that if I do that, somebody is always going to need me. That's the one thing I master no matter what's going on in my life.

And think about who's telling you this. Executive recruiters are the only profession on earth that has to be an expert in what a job seeker goes through: we live it every single day, seven days a week. So ask any recruiter you trust where their roles actually come from. Every one of them will tell you the same thing: somebody they know. Our whole expertise is maintaining relationships. We are the experts, and that's what we do.

This is why I get frustrated with all the easy advice out there. Everybody loves to tell you the high-level stuff: "just use your network," "customize your resume to the job," "run it through AI." It's so easy to say. But nobody ever tells you the end result of all that effort, or whether it's even the best way to spend your time. And here's the honest part most people won't admit: when's the last time the resume writer had to look for a job? When's the last time the career coach did? And when they did, did they go pound the job boards? Of course not. If you were coaching your own kid, you'd tell them to network. We just don't follow our own fundamentals.

That's the one thing I can promise you about me. I teach what I do. I teach what I believe. I don't give advice I don't follow myself, and that's the whole reason people follow me. And the fundamentals never change, no matter your industry or your function, because I've lived them.

Let me give you one real example, because it says it all. I was talking with a senior product executive who'd spent thousands of dollars with a career coach. Part of what she had him do was hammer every big executive search firm with his resume: Korn Ferry, Spencer Stuart, all of them. You know what he got? Ghosted. Not a single response. Their desks are buried under thousands of resumes that all look exactly like his. But then he reached out to an old colleague from a startup, just to catch up (no pitch) and happened to mention he was searching. And she said, "Funny you say that. One of those very firms just called me about a chief product officer role, and I think you'd be perfect. Let me connect you." Within a couple of weeks he was interviewing for the role. The same firm that ignored his cold email came running the moment somebody they trusted made the introduction. That's the whole book in one story.

So be honest with yourself. By the time your career is over, you are never going to look back and say you had a wonderful career because of a job board. Nobody has ever said that in the history of the world. What you're going to say is that you had a wonderful career because you built a fantastic reputation.

Hold onto that. Because there's one more place everybody confuses for networking, and it's the biggest one of all.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Elephant in the Room

I can't write a book about networking today without talking about LinkedIn. It's the elephant in the room. And I've got a perspective on it most people don't, because I've been part of LinkedIn since the early days: not as somebody posting, but as a recruiter. I watched it become what it is. And I'll tell you, in the beginning, nobody knew what it was going to be. Nobody really knew what it was for.

Let me tell you what it was for, at least for people like me.

In my world, the hardest part of the job was never finding the people who were looking. Job boards handled that. They showed up in the late nineties, and they gave us the active seeker, the person raising their hand. But here's the thing about recruiting: about seventy percent of the people you actually want aren't looking. That's the whole game. The prize is the passive candidate: the person who's happy where they are, doing great work, not answering job postings. At GNR, that was our whole model. How do you get to the person who isn't looking?

LinkedIn became the answer. Because here's the quiet truth about why people really joined: they wanted to be recruited. There have always been two kinds of people on LinkedIn: the ones using it to develop business and grow what they do, and the ones who, whether they'd admit it or not, wanted to put their name in the hat and be found. LinkedIn became the pipeline to the passive candidate, and it did a beautiful job of it. Everybody wanted to be a part of it.

And this was long before the social-media stuff. In the beginning it was just about being in the network, being findable. Then LinkedIn started asking a new question: do you have something to say? And that's what gave us the feed: the posting, the opinions, the social side. And that led to the next thing: I want to connect with everybody. Whether I know them or not. That wasn't LinkedIn's fault, by the way. It was just the nature of growing something that had never existed before. How do you build a professional version of Facebook? You grow, grow, grow, and you try to get everybody on the globe to join.

Around 2012 is when it really changed for us. That's when recruiters figured out that LinkedIn was the single best tool and strategy we'd ever had. And once the membership figured out that recruiters were recruiting from it, everything changed. Everybody wanted in.

Now here's where the story turns, and you have to follow the money to understand it. A huge part of LinkedIn's revenue was selling to people like me: selling recruiters the tools to find and reach candidates. And it worked so well that in 2016 they sold the company to Microsoft for about twenty-six billion dollars.

And when that happened, the platform changed.

It stopped being this open thing that wanted to connect everybody. Because Microsoft is an enterprise company. Their job is to compete with Salesforce and everybody else in that world. And what does Microsoft have that nobody else on earth has? A database of hundreds of millions of professionals called LinkedIn. So everything shifted: not just for the candidate, but for the recruiting firms too.

And here's where we are today: LinkedIn has gotten too big. Ask ten people why they're on it and you'll get ten different answers, because there's no focus anymore. It's just a giant

database of people. Hundreds of millions of them, and no sense of community, and, most importantly, no trust. That's LinkedIn's real problem now. Nobody trusts it. And they're trying to fix it, but I think it may be too late, because you can't rebuild trust after you've grown too big and, frankly, worn too many people out.

Let me give you the numbers from my side of the desk, because they tell the whole story. Years ago, as a recruiter, I'd get ninety percent open rates on my InMails and fifty percent response rates. Today? About forty-five percent open, and fifteen percent response. That's what saturation looks like. People don't trust it, they don't log in like they used to, they're buried under a mountain of messages and InMails, and now everybody has an opinion the second they read one. Getting to a passive candidate through LinkedIn (the thing it was best at), for us, that's basically over. And as AI changes everything about how we find people, I promise you the answer isn't going to be LinkedIn.

So what's the moral of the story? It's the opposite of what you'd think. All of this, LinkedIn, the saturation, the AI, doesn't make relationships less important. It makes them more important.

Think about what I've watched over twenty-five years. When I started in the nineties, ninety percent of roles were filled by somebody knowing somebody. Then came job boards. Then internal corporate recruiters. Then LinkedIn. Then AI. Think of all that technology, all that so-called progress in how we find and hire people. And that statistic hasn't moved an inch. Still ninety percent. If anything, it's amplified.

And let me say a word about AI, since it's on everybody's mind. AI is going to make all of this faster and better. But be clear-eyed about where. It can make you dramatically better at the ninety percent: helping you organize your network, tell your story, and stay in touch with the people who already know you.

It's a gift, and it's exactly where you should point it. What AI cannot do is rescue the ten percent. All it does there is let you fire off more applications and reach more recruiters who still don't know you. Twenty years from now, with whatever incredible tools exist, the statistic will still be ninety percent. So aim your AI at the ninety, not the ten.

Because here's what the digital world actually did. Back when I started, a company could only post a job in the back of a trade magazine or a newspaper. Hardly anybody saw it. Now, as a candidate, sure, you can see thousands of jobs. But so can everybody else. Every posting you find, a thousand other people found too. All the technology did was crank up the competition. There are so many people in the world who can do what you do. This is exactly why, if you want to create a real opportunity, you'd better go through somebody you know.

So let me leave you with the way I actually want you to think about LinkedIn, because I'm not telling you to quit it. I'm telling you to understand what it's really good for.

The true value of LinkedIn today, for your career, is not the job postings. It's not the hundred million people. It's the one thing no other platform on earth can give you: it's the ability to find your past. It is a database of your past. It doesn't matter how old you are: everyone you've ever met is in there. And that is the place you go to find them again.

But here's my real pet peeve with LinkedIn, and the catch you can't miss: sitting there on the platform, that network isn't actually yours. LinkedIn owns it. You don't own your network until you get it out: until you pull those relationships into your own hands, where you can reach people directly instead of hoping the platform lets you. So we don't just admire your past on LinkedIn. We get it out, and we make it yours.

This is how you maximize the ninety percent. You use LinkedIn not to shout into a crowd of strangers, but to quietly walk back through thirty years of people who already know you. Ask yourself what LinkedIn is really worth to you today. Because it's a completely different answer than it was five, ten, or twenty years ago. Today, it's a history of your past. So let's go use it to find our past.

That's networking. And that's exactly what the rest of this book is about.

PART TWO

The Art

CHAPTER SIX

You Are the Product

I want you to make one shift in your head, and if you make it, everything else in this book falls into place.

Stop thinking of yourself as a candidate. There are a hundred million candidates on LinkedIn. I've got a whole database of them. Get out of the candidate bucket.

You are the CEO of your own company. You are the product.

I know that sounds like a line, so let me make it real. When a business needs to grow, what does it do? It builds a sales and marketing funnel. It uses a CRM to keep track of its customers. Ninety-one percent of companies run on one. It figures out how to stay in front of the people who already buy from it. No serious company today is running its customer relationships on a spreadsheet, or worse, on nothing. So let me ask you the uncomfortable question: how are you running yours?

You are a business now. You've been one for years, you just never treated yourself like one.

Here's a piece of math I love. Take your age and subtract twenty-one. That's how old your company is. If you're fifty-three, your company is thirty-two years old. Now, where does a thirty-two-year-old company get its business? From cold-calling strangers? Of course not. It gets it from reputation. From decades of customers and relationships. Where do lawyers in their fifties get their clients? Where do orthopedic surgeons get their patients? Reputation. Not cold calls.

You've spent thirty years building a reputation. It's your product's whole value. And here's what most executives get wrong about their own brand: they think if they're struggling, it's a reputation problem. It almost never is. It's an accessibility problem. The people who know you already have an opinion of what you're good at. They just don't know they can pick up the phone and call you. They don't know you're available. You spent your whole career being loyal to a company, so you never made yourself accessible to your network. That's the thing we're going to fix. Not your reputation. Your accessibility.

Because your value was never your background. Let's be honest. There are a lot of people on LinkedIn who can do what you do. What's rare, what's actually yours, is thirty or forty years of contacts. That's the product nobody else has.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It's Bigger Than a Job

Let me ask you a question that trips up almost every executive I talk to. When you started reading this book, what were you actually after? Nine out of ten of you thought the same thing: a job. The next role. The full-time seat.

I want to blow that up, because it's way too small.

Once you accept that you're the product, that you're the CEO of your own company, the real question isn't "how do I find a job." It's "what does my network need from me?" And the answer, especially once you've got a few decades behind you, is almost never just one thing. There are actually four kinds of opportunities every executive should be building toward: a full-time role, consulting, advisory work, and board seats. Full-time, consulting, advisory, board. Most people chase one and ignore the other three, and leave the best parts of their career on the table.

Why does this matter more than it used to? As you move into your fifties and sixties, more and more of your opportunities come through consulting and advising first. I told you the numbers earlier, and they only get more lopsided with age. So if the only thing you're hunting for is a full-time job, you are fishing in the smallest pond, at the worst time of your life to be fishing in it.

Think about what a job board can offer you. Exactly one thing: a full-time posting. That's it. It has no idea you'd be a phenomenal advisor to a startup, or that three companies in your network would gladly pay you to consult, or that a board would love to have your experience in the room. Only your network knows that.

Only the people who've watched you work for thirty years can look at you and say, "I don't need you full-time. But I could really use your advice." It's exactly what happened to Norm. He's a fractional CISO for four different companies, he sits on advisory boards, he's doing work with private equity firms. And he didn't set out to build any of it. His network built it for him, once he gave them the chance.

And here's the freedom in it. When you stop thinking "job" and start thinking "portfolio," your whole career changes shape. You're not betting everything on one employer who isn't betting on you. You've got several things going at once (a little consulting here, an advisory role there, maybe a board seat), and if one ends, you're not back to zero. That's what makes a career recession-proof. It's what finally lets you control your own destiny instead of handing it to a company. Norm could go back full-time tomorrow if he wanted; he doesn't, because he's built something he'd rather have.

This is a big part of what we do inside Phello, and it's why the tools matter: your Phello website tells the whole story of what you're capable of, not just your last job title, and your network (organized in the CRM and communicated with consistently) is what surfaces all four kinds of opportunities. But you don't need the platform to grasp the mindset. Just stop shrinking yourself down to a job description. You're worth more than that. The question was never "who's hiring." The question is "what does my network need from me?" And the answer is bigger than a job.

CHAPTER EIGHT

From "I'm Looking for a Job" to "How Can I Help You?"

Alright. So you've got this network. Now what do you say to it?

This is where almost everybody freezes. Because the only time most executives ever reach out to their network is when they need something. "Hey, I'm looking." And it feels self-serving, and it feels desperate, and so they don't do it. Or they only do it with the same fifteen or twenty people they're comfortable with.

So I'm going to give you the single most important change you'll make, and it's just a few words. Your message to your network is never "I'm looking for a job." It is always: **how can I help you?**

That's it, the whole shift. You're not asking. You're offering.

Now, I can already hear you: Kurt, I've got my own problems, why am I offering to help other people? Because that's how this actually works. Here's a truth I learned the hard way over a lot of years: the executives who go out and sell themselves (here's what I'm good at, here's what I want, here's my resume), they struggle. And the ones who go out and listen (what are you dealing with, what's hard right now, how can I help), those are the ones who explode with opportunity. Every time.

The most important skill in all of networking is listening. Not pitching. Listening.

And let me take the fear out of it, because the fear is the real problem. You think you're imposing. You think, I haven't talked to this person in fifteen years, they don't want to hear from me.

Wrong. Your network wants to reconnect with you exactly as much as you want to reconnect with them. It is not a one-way street. When you reach out to someone you worked with fifteen years ago and say, "Hey, I'm sorry we lost touch, I'd love to catch up," they light up. Everybody wishes they'd stayed in better touch. Everybody.

I've watched executives send that note to a few hundred people and get a thirty-five percent response. Think about that. Now you're on the phone with a hundred people, and you never once said "I need a job." You just said hello and asked how you could help. That's not sales. That's not marketing. That's networking. These are people you've met through the years. You don't have to sell them anything.

CHAPTER NINE

But I'm Not a Networker

I can hear the objection already, because I hear it from almost everyone: "Kurt, this all sounds great, but I'm just not a networker."

Good. Neither are most of the best networkers I know.

Here's the problem: the word "networking" has been ruined. When you hear it, you picture the thing everybody hates: standing in a hotel ballroom with a name tag, working the room, shoving business cards at strangers, making small talk with people you'll never see again. If that's what networking meant, I wouldn't do it either. But that's not this. That has nothing to do with what I'm asking you to do.

What I'm asking you to do is reconnect with people you already know. That's it. People you worked alongside for years. People who already have an opinion of you and would be genuinely happy to hear from you. No room to work, no strangers, no pitch. Just, "Hey, it's been too long, I'd love to catch up." You've done that a thousand times in your life. You just never called it networking.

Now let me take on the three fears I hear most, because they're all built on a misunderstanding.

"I feel like I'm bothering people." You're not. I promise you, your network wants to reconnect with you as much as you want to reconnect with them. Probably more. Everybody, and I mean everybody, wishes they'd done a better job staying in touch. When you reach out, you're not the imposition. You're the answer to

something they've been meaning to do for years.

"It feels salesy and fake." It would, if you were selling something. But you're not. Remember the shift: you never lead with "I'm looking for a job." You lead with "how can I help you?" There is nothing fake about calling an old colleague to see how they're doing and asking what you can do for them. That's not sales. That's the human connection — the thing we've lost in the age of AI and digital.

"I'm an introvert. This isn't for me." This might be the biggest myth of all. The best networkers I've ever seen are not the loud, back-slapping ones. They're the listeners. And the whole skill here (I'll say it again because it's that important) is listening. Understanding what someone actually needs. Introverts tend to be phenomenal at exactly that. You're not being asked to perform. You're being asked to pay attention.

So if the real issue isn't the people, what is it? For most executives, the honest answer is: they don't know what to say. What do I write to someone I haven't spoken to in fifteen years? How personal do I get? What's the first move? Fair enough. Nobody ever taught you. But notice what that means: it's not that you can't network. It's that you were never shown how. It's a completely different problem, and it's a solvable one.

And let me reframe it one more way, because this is the part that should give you confidence. What you're really feeling isn't that you're bad at networking. It's that you've never built up any reps at it. Think about the first interview you ever did. You were nervous, you weren't sure what to say, you stumbled through it. By the tenth one, you were comfortable. Nothing about you changed. You just did it enough times that it became second nature. Networking is no different.

Now think about your whole career. How many times were you handed something you had never done before, something that felt completely over your head on day one? And how many times did you overcome it, either because somebody showed you how, or because you just kept doing it until it clicked? Just about every time. This is the same. It's easy to sit down and submit to a job posting, because it takes no skill at all. Networking takes a little effort and a little practice. The only reason it feels uncomfortable right now is that nobody ever taught you how, and you haven't done it enough yet. Once you learn how, and once you do it consistently, the discomfort goes away and it becomes a no-brainer, the same way everything else you're good at did.

This is a big part of why Phello exists, and why it isn't just software. Yes, there's the technology (the website, the CRM), but there's also the training that teaches you exactly what to say and how to say it, and there's a whole community of executives who felt every bit as awkward as you do right now and got past it. You don't have to figure this out alone, and you don't have to be a "networker." You just have to be willing to say hello.

CHAPTER TEN

Your Network Is Your Superpower

Let me tell you what happens when an executive actually sits down and looks at their network for the first time. It's one of my favorite things to watch.

You've already heard me mention Norm. Now let me tell you his whole story. He's a CISO: a top security executive, forty years of experience, based out of Omaha. Good networker his whole life, but no organization to it at all. Norm came to me in his early sixties asking the question everybody asks at that age: what's next? And in his head, the answer was one more full-time role. One more CISO job.

Norm had seventeen thousand LinkedIn connections. Seventeen thousand. But when we actually went through them the right way (when we cut it down to the people he'd genuinely met over the course of his career, at the right level), he had about five hundred. And that number, that five hundred, changed his life.

Because here's what he discovered in there. Roughly half the people had left the industry he first met them in, which meant his network wasn't one industry anymore, it was diverse. And roughly half had grown into director-level roles and above. Because Norm wasn't the only one who got promoted over thirty-five years. Everybody in that network grew up right alongside him.

This is the secret most people miss. As you get older, your network should make your life easier, not harder. Lawyers are more successful in their fifties than in their thirties: not because

they became better lawyers, but because they know more people. A company is more valuable after thirty years because its customer base is bigger. You are no different. Your network has been getting bigger and bigger your whole career. You've just been neglecting it.

And there's one more thing that makes it a superpower, and it's the part people underestimate the most. The value of a contact is not who they work for. It's who they know. Every single person in your network has their own three or four hundred people. So when you reconnect with somebody, most of the time your next opportunity doesn't come from them: it comes from who they introduce you to, and who that person introduces you to. That's how it grows like a weed.

So don't sit there and pre-judge your list. You have no idea who likes you. You have no idea who's going to respond, or who needs exactly what you have. I reach out to nine thousand executives three times a year and I still don't know who's going to need me. The whole game is to stop deciding for other people whether you can help them, and just reach out.

One caution, and it matters. Your brand doesn't resonate with a person until you've actually spoken to them or met them in person. A LinkedIn connection you never talked to isn't a relationship. It's a name. So we're talking about the people you've truly met. Those are the ones with your reputation attached. Those are the gold.

Now, somebody always asks me the honest follow-up: "Kurt, half my connections are people I've never actually met in person, what about them?" Good question. The short answer is, those are cold: you handle them inside LinkedIn, not in your outreach, because there's no relationship there yet. But here's the thing: you almost never need them. Get really good at the people you've

genuinely met, and I promise you'll be busier than you can handle. Norm maintains a network of five hundred and he can barely keep up. Nobody needs to know five thousand people.

And there's a beautiful move one of my members figured out for those un-met connections, and it's pure networking. When Norm is on a "how can I help you" call with someone, and he notices they're connected to a person he's never met at a company that could help them, he reaches out to that stranger: not for himself, but on behalf of the person he's helping. It's less threatening, it moves something forward for somebody else, and it quietly builds him a brand-new relationship in the process. That's how the whole thing compounds: you talk to one person, they introduce you to two, those two introduce you to two more each, and before long you've got more good conversations than you have time for.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tell Your Story

Here's something I figured out about my own career that cracked the whole thing open.

As I started reconnecting with my own network, I realized nobody was looking at my LinkedIn profile. Why would they? They already knew me. Nobody was going to my recruiting firm's website either — same reason. They already knew me. So all that stuff I'd built to tell people who I was, the people who mattered most never looked at it.

And it hit me: I needed something that actually told my story. Not a resume. Not a bullet-point profile that looks like everybody else's. A story.

This is why I became such a believer in personal websites. And I mean personal, not a consulting site. A place where you tell the whole story of your career, the roles you took, the choices you made, going all the way back, in your own voice. And here's why it matters, beyond vanity.

There are three problems in the market right now, and storytelling fixes all three.

One: executives walk into meetings and interviews without ever having thought through their own story. They're recalling it on the spot. Writing it down forces you to think about thirty-five years of your career before you have to talk about it.

Two: interviews used to be two phone calls and a full day on-site, where they could really get to know you. Now it's five or six thirty-minute Zoom calls off a resume, and everybody's

having shallow, unproductive conversations. Give people your story ahead of time and every one of those conversations gets deeper. We all spend hours reading and searching before we do anything now. People want to learn about you. Let them.

Three, and this is the big one: nobody is memorable anymore. I've looked at thousands of profiles, and I couldn't tell you a thing about any of them. But the personal stories, the human stuff, that's what sticks. That's what makes me remember you when I need you.

Now, when I say tell your story, most people immediately assume that means listing their accomplishments. It doesn't. Here's the priority, and I'm blunt about this with everybody: the story is the *role*, not the highlights. The successes are the cherry on top. What I actually need to understand (what anybody in your network needs to understand) is what the role *was*. What did you really do? Because you can tell me your wins all day long, and I have no way of knowing whether they're even true. What I *can* understand is the role itself. So take each role and tell it like a story: how it started, how it grew, how your responsibilities changed over those three or four years. Do that, and the successes come out naturally along the way, in context, where they actually mean something. Then take your three or four proudest wins and put them at the top of the page, and tell the story behind each one. That's what makes you different from the hundred million people who all look the same on paper.

I watched a chief marketing officer named Colleen go through this. She'd left a company because the environment was actually hurting her health, and she was rebuilding. And she told me that writing her story out was therapeutic — it validated for her what a wonderful career she'd actually had. And here's the part I want you to hear: it wasn't a resume exercise. It became human. She

became a person again in a digital world full of bullet points.

One last thing about your story. It's a first draft, not a final draft. It's a living document. A resume goes stale the day you post it: when you learn something new about yourself, there's nowhere to put it. Your story is different. Every time your network teaches you something, every new project, every insight, you go back and add to it. It grows as you grow.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Use Age as an Advantage

I have to talk about age, because it's the single biggest fear I hear from executives, and there's more to it than anybody tells you. So let me give you the honest picture: the hard part and the hopeful part, because both are true.

Start with where we came from. If you grew up in the corporate world in the seventies, eighties, and nineties, the whole mindset was built around one number: fifty-five. You had a pension. My first job out of college, AMP had a pension plan. The goal was to get to fifty-five, collect your benefits, and be done. My own mom retired in her late fifties and moved down south for the warm weather. That was the dream: quit, retire, go take your walks. And because of that, ten, fifteen, twenty years ago, as a recruiter I would never have gone looking for somebody in their fifties. Why would I? They were all about to retire.

Well, here's what happened. The fifty-five-year-old stopped retiring. That pension world ended, and suddenly there's a whole demographic that simply didn't exist before. Think about the old pattern: you became an executive by your mid-forties, you plateaued for about ten years, and you retired at fifty-five, and as you left, the forty-five-year-old backfilled you. That was the cycle. Now the fifty-five-year-old isn't leaving. So we've got about ten extra years' worth of executives in the market, and we are not about to magically create millions of new companies to absorb them. There are simply way more execs than there are seats. That's the real engine behind everything you're feeling. And

it's a big reason consulting has to become part of your life: it's how we're filling that gap.

Now let me tell you where ageism actually lives, because it's not everywhere. It lives in the ten percent. In the corporate hiring world, where nobody knows you.

And I'm going to put the mirror up to you the same way I do with my executives. When you were the hiring manager, when's the last time you hired somebody in their sixties? And every single one of them says the same thing: I haven't. So I ask the obvious question: then why do you suddenly think you're a viable candidate at sixty, when you wouldn't hire one yourself? I'm a recruiter, and I can't tell you the last time a client asked me to go find someone in their late fifties or sixties.

Here's the thing: I don't think it's about whether you can do the job. It's a quieter question than that. When you're sixty, how many years do you have left? And the honest truth is, the market doesn't know yet, because there just isn't enough history of people working productively into their sixties and seventies for anybody to trust it. When somebody says they're fifty-one, we assume a long runway. When somebody says they're sixty-one, nobody's quite sure. It's a little ironic, because everybody's changing jobs every three years anyway. But in the corporate mind, we still act like you're going to be with us forever. So the cold math kicks in: if I don't know you, why would I take Norm at sixty-one when I can take Norm at fifty-one? He was just as good at fifty-one. And here's a truth people don't like to hear: you don't plateau at sixty. You plateau after about thirty years. By the time you're fifty, you're really, really good at what you do, and there's not a lot of new growth left. So to a stranger holding two resumes, of course they take the younger one.

And it's going to be this way for a while. My honest guess is it's about twenty years until age stops being the problem it is today. And then it'll just move to the next number, and we'll be asking whether people can work into their seventies. But for the world we're in right now, if you're past fifty-five, sixty, sixty-five, it's a real question in that market. Age becomes just another checkbox. It's the same trap as everything else in the ten percent: if you've changed jobs five times in seven years, you have to defend that to strangers. If you've been at one company for thirty years, you have to defend that too: can you even adapt to our culture? How would they know? They don't know you. That's why the ten percent is so brutal. Everything becomes a box to check, because nobody knows who you are.

So how do we solve it? The same way we solve everything in this book. Your network does not care how old you are.

But first, a word about hiding it, because so many people try. They scrub the dates off their LinkedIn, they bury when they graduated. Stop. Here's my philosophy, and I believe it all the way down: be proud of your history. Be proud that you started in the eighties, that you worked through the nineties and the two-thousands, that you've seen it all. Because let me tell you the truth about hiding it: I'm going to find out anyway. And if a company is going to have a problem with you being sixty, then you weren't getting that job regardless. So why spend your energy on something you can't control? You can't help how someone feels about your age. What you can do is stand on your career. I've had a wonderful career. I'm proud of it. And I've still got ten years left.

And here's the part that changes everything, because it's not just a pep talk: I watch it happen. The executives I work with who maintain their networks well? I never have a single conversation

with them about their age. Not one. In fact, a lot of them are in their sixties having the best years of their entire careers, with more opportunities than they've ever had. Why? Because when someone in your network needs a business problem solved, they do not care how old you are. They care whether you can solve it. Why do you think lawyers work into their eighties? Nobody's checking their birthday. They're solving problems for people who know them.

That's the whole reframe. In that ten percent, your age is a wall you keep slamming into. In the ninety percent, nobody even brings it up, and if anything it works in your favor. Think about it: if you've been around for forty years, you have a forty-year network. That is dramatically more powerful than what a thirty-five-year-old has. Your age isn't the liability. It's the asset. And when someone in your network brings you in, there's no qualifying, no checklist, no defending yourself: it's just, "can you help me?" Go back through the careers of the executives you admire and you'll find something remarkable: how many of them landed roles through their network without ever writing a resume? It happens all the time. Somebody they knew needed them, and that was that.

So when an executive comes to me devastated about ageism, telling me it's killing their search, it tells me one thing. They're working the ten percent. It's the same signal as too many job changes, or too-long tenure, or gaps in a career. It's all the same problem: cold calling. And cold calling is brutal. Ask any salesperson: it's the hardest thing in the world, because nobody knows you and everything is a checklist. Recruiters and job boards are cold calling, and in cold calling, age is a great big box to check, because to a stranger the gap between fifty and sixty looks enormous.

But your network isn't cold calling. Your network is thirty, forty years of people who already know exactly what you're worth. So fix where you're spending your time, and watch what happens to the age question. The age question doesn't just get smaller. It flips on you completely, and turns into the best thing you've got.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Consistency, and the Long Game

Let me tell you the two things that sink executives in this process. Not one. Two, and they go together.

First, they don't communicate with enough people in their network. You cannot have one great customer and call it a business. A company needs a funnel. So do you. Volume matters as much as quality, and you need both.

The second is they're not consistent. And this is the one that really gets people.

What happens is this. Somebody loses a job, so they scramble and network like crazy, and they find something. And the second they land, what do they do? They stop. Right back to zero. Because there's no accountability: nobody's making them keep going. Then twelve months later they call me, out of work again, and I ask, "What'd you do with your network the last year?" Nothing. And that's the whole problem, because you always reach out to your network at the exact moment you need it, which is the worst possible time.

The fix is to touch your network when you don't need anything. I reach out to mine three times a year, every year, whether I need something or not. And I'm humble about it. I never take for granted that these people are busy. I do it consistently so they think of me when they need me, not so I can ask them for something.

In fact, the best time to network is when you love your job. Think about it. If I reach out and say, "Hey, I just wanted to stay in touch, hope you had a great summer," of course you respond. There's nothing to sell, nothing to dodge. You're just two people who know each other, saying hello. And a lot of life is timing: being in front of the right person at the right time. You can't manufacture the timing. But you can make sure that when the timing hits, you're the one they think of.

Do this, and something remarkable happens to your career: it stops being a rollercoaster. I'm going to say something that sounds like a brag but is just the truth: after all these years, I'm completely recession-proof. Not because I'm special. Because my funnel is that strong. When you maintain a real network with real consistency, you stop relying on any one company to save you. You stop panicking about the market. And, as I said in the last chapter, you stop worrying about your age. Because the network that already knows you never asks how old you are.

And here's where it's all headed anyway. There's a side door most people don't see. More and more, full-time roles get filled by somebody who consulted with the company first. When you're fifty, half of executive roles come that way. At fifty-five, three-quarters. At sixty, almost all of them. So a full-time job and a consulting gig aren't even two different things anymore: it's just how big the problem is and how much of you they need. If you're not consulting inside your network, you're not just missing consulting money. You're missing the front door to the full-time roles too.

There's one more thing I have to say here, because it's the hardest part for most executives, and it has nothing to do with tactics. It's about control.

Think about how you got here. For your entire career, you've been in control. The opportunities came, you navigated them, you made the moves, you always had the answer for what was next. It's part of what made you an executive. And then one day (usually somewhere in your fifties) you're looking for the first time in your life, and for the first time, you don't have the answer. You've lost the one thing you've always had: control. And I'm telling you, that is the scariest, most uncomfortable feeling in a whole career. It makes people emotional, and emotional people make bad decisions: they grab the first thing that comes along, they panic, they take the wrong role for the wrong reasons.

So here's what I want you to hear, and it's the most freeing thing I can tell you: you don't have to have the answer right now. That's okay. After more than twenty-five years, I don't sit around strategizing my next move: I trust my reputation, and I let my network guide me. And it does. It has pulled me into new industries, new kinds of companies, things I never would have planned, because my network got so big and so strong that I don't have to micromanage my path anymore. It's the same reason great lawyers in their fifties and sixties aren't just practicing law: they're on boards, they're investing, they're pulled into a dozen things, all because their reputation carries them there. When you're young, you've got to go chase the path. Once you've built a real reputation and a real network, you stop chasing it. It starts coming to you.

So be patient. Be thoughtful. Don't let the fear of not knowing shove you into a bad decision. Trust the reputation you've spent thirty years building, and trust the network you've been organizing and reconnecting with. Because it will guide you. If board roles are where you belong, it'll take you to board roles. If it's a full-time seat, it'll take you there. Maybe it takes you to both.

You don't have to force it, and you don't have to have it all figured out today. Your network will teach you your next move. It always does.

And let me leave you with the way Norm puts it, because he said it better than I ever could. He told me people make the mistake of thinking about this as a journey to a destination — you land the job, or you sign the contract, and it's over. It's not. It becomes an ongoing thing you don't ever want to stop, because the best part was never the deal. It's staying in people's lives — knowing what's going on with them, and being right there when they hit a challenge or an opportunity. That's the whole game. It doesn't end. And once you've done it right, you won't want it to.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

You Can't Do This Alone

I've given you a lot to do in this book. Organize thirty years of contacts. Tell your story. Reach out. Stay consistent. And if you're being honest, some part of you is already wondering whether you'll actually keep it up.

You won't. Not by yourself. And I mean that as encouragement, not an insult. Because almost nobody does it alone, including me.

I've watched this happen a thousand times. An executive gets motivated, does the work, has some success, and then life gets busy and it all quietly stops. There's no accountability. Nobody's checking in. And the next time they look up, it's a year later, they need their network again, and they've done nothing with it. The hardest part of all of this isn't knowing what to do. It's staying consistent when no one's holding you to it.

The first reason you need a community is accountability. People around you doing the same thing, so it becomes a habit instead of a fire drill.

The second reason is that you'll learn faster from your peers than from anyone else. I can teach you the fundamentals, but the real gold comes from sitting with another executive who's two years ahead of you and hearing exactly what worked and what flopped: how they structured a consulting agreement, what they said in a reconnection note, how they handled a board conversation. One voice can't give you that. And I'll be honest with you: I'd rather you learn from a room full of great networkers

than pay five thousand dollars for a single career coach's opinion. It's not even close.

The third reason is the one nobody talks about, and it's the most human. Looking for your next thing is lonely. I've had CEOs of half-billion-dollar companies tell me that within a couple of months of leaving, they felt more isolated than they had in their entire careers. Because LinkedIn doesn't care about you, the job boards don't care about you, the recruiters don't care about you, and there's no one to talk to who actually understands. That loneliness is real, and it wears people down.

A community fixes all three. And it's why I believe the next great phase of career development isn't going to be a better job board or a smarter piece of software. It's going to be executive communities: execs helping execs. Because the thing this whole digital world is missing is the human connection — and that only comes from people who actually know each other.

Later in this book I'll tell you about two members who met inside the Phello community, built a real relationship over months, and one of them ended up hiring the other onto a brand-new AI team at one of the biggest technology companies in the world. That doesn't happen on a job board. It can't. There's no community there to make it happen.

This is the part of Phello I'm proudest of. When I built it, I thought the technology and the training were the whole thing. I was wrong. The most valuable part turned out to be the members themselves: a trusted room of executives, in your function, in your industry, in your city, all working on the same thing and all willing to help each other. Surround yourself with great networkers and you'll become one. That's not a slogan. It's just how it works.

So don't try to white-knuckle this by yourself. Find your people. It's the difference between a burst of motivation and a habit that lasts the rest of your career.

PART THREE

The Proof

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Accidental Company

I never set out to build a company. I want to be honest about that, because the way it actually happened is the whole point.

Around 2010, something changed. My executives (the CEOs and VPs I'd known for years) stopped retiring at fifty-five. That pension-plan world just ended. So all of a sudden, for the first time in my career, people were calling me in their fifties and sixties saying, "Kurt, I've never had to look for a job in my life. How do I do this?"

Now remember: I'm a recruiter. I get paid by my clients, not by candidates. These folks calling me didn't have jobs for me to fill. The smart business move was to not spend time on them. But I couldn't help it. I started thinking, if I give these people some advice, maybe I help them become better hiring managers, better candidates, and we build a relationship. So I started scheduling them. Twenty calls a day sometimes, just catching up, hearing what they were dealing with.

And I'd ask everybody the same question: how many people in your own network have you actually reached out to? And every single time, every time, the answer was "less than twenty." Ninety-nine percent of them. That was the lightbulb. That first executive who told me, "you're fifty years old and you're not talking to thirty years of contacts," that stuck with me. And I thought: I'm really good at this. I do it for myself every day. Let me just teach them how I do it.

So for a few years, I gave it away for free. Export your connections. Update your profile. Reach out to your network. And people were so grateful: nobody had ever taken the time, especially not a recruiter. It fed my firm, honestly, because those people came back to me with openings. But it was a mountain of unpaid work, and my advice was too high-level. People kept coming back with detailed questions I didn't have time to answer for free.

My business partner Mike finally said it out loud: "Kurt, you've got a business here."

So I called an old college roommate, Jim, who runs an incubator, and told him the whole story. And Jim asked the only question that matters at the start: "Will somebody actually pay you for this?" Two weeks later I had my answer. A gentleman named Gary (sixty-something, thirty-five years at one company, just left, scared to death his career was over) wrote me a check for the full year. Twelve hundred dollars. There was no software. There was nothing. It was horse-and-buggy. I organized Gary's connections by hand in a spreadsheet, sorted into tabs by level, wrote him an email, and we sent it out. And within a few months Gary landed a role with IBM's IoT group, which was the hottest thing going at the time.

That was it. That was the proof. I signed the papers and gave it a name in December of 2015. Still didn't have a line of software. I took out a loan, went and recruited two developers down in Raleigh (a front-end guy and a back-end guy who worked at the same company and didn't even know each other), and we started building.

Everything after that came from watching real people. The personal website came from realizing nobody looked at my LinkedIn because they already knew me. The community came

from realizing the executives helping each other were worth more than anything I could build. It all came from paying attention to what people actually needed. It was never a grand plan. It was a lot of years of me doing this, and finally deciding to build the thing I wished had existed.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Story Behind the Name

I need to tell you where the name came from, because it means more to me than anything else in this book.

The name Phello was given to me by a dear friend, a wonderful person who has since passed away from brain cancer. And she didn't just come up with a word. She wove three things together into one.

First, my own name is in it. Phelps. Because this is my process: the thing I spent a whole career becoming an expert in.

Second, "fellow." In the world I come from, fellows are leaders. And leaders are exactly who this is for.

And third, hello. Because that's the whole spirit of it. When you network this way, you're reaching out to people who already know you. You're not pitching them. You're not selling them anything. You're just saying hello. It isn't sales, and it isn't marketing. It's networking. It's a hello to someone you've already met somewhere along the way.

Phelps. Fellow. Hello. Put them together and you get Phello.

I still think about how perfectly she captured the whole thing in one word: that it's personal, that it's for leaders, and that at its heart it's the warmth of a hello, not the push of a pitch. Every time I say the name, I think of her. And I think that's exactly right, because this whole philosophy is really just a way of honoring the people who shaped you by staying in touch with them while you still can.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The People Who Prove It

I've taught this to thousands of executives now, over about ten years, and I'll tell you my success rate is basically a hundred percent: because it's their network, and their network always works. But statistics don't move people. People move people. So let me introduce you to a few: every one of them a Phello member, and every one a real person who did exactly what I've been describing in this book.

You already met Norm: the CISO who cut seventeen thousand connections down to five hundred. Here's how his story ends up, at least so far. He walked in wanting one more full-time CISO role, and the market's ageism was working against him. But once he organized his network and started reaching out, he realized something: his network didn't want him full-time. They wanted his advice. They wanted him consulting, advising, on their boards. Today Norm is the busiest he's been in forty years. He's the fractional CISO for four different companies, he sits on several advisory boards guiding tech startups, and he's even started doing work with private equity and venture capital firms on the security side of their investments. He's charging four hundred and fifty dollars an hour, making the most money he's ever made. And he'll tell you the shift that did it was learning to stop selling himself and start solving other people's problems. He said it felt completely natural. That's what happens.

You met Colleen: the CMO who found her story therapeutic. When she organized her network she was stunned at how many

people she actually knew. And when she reached out, the thing that got her wasn't a job. It was how many people wrote back wanting to catch up. She felt validated. And I'm telling you, that's the real reward for almost everybody: not the role, the rekindling. Colleen runs a thriving consulting practice now, and she runs it by choice. She could go full-time. She's decided she likes controlling her own career.

There's another member, Jeff: a marketing executive who came to me in late 2024 looking for a chief marketing officer role. He'd been an EMT once: something almost nobody knew about him until he told his story. He reached out to his network with "how can I help you," and got a huge response. But here's the thing: in 2025, the market didn't want a full-time CMO. It wanted CMOs on a consulting basis. So he consulted the whole year. And in 2026, one of those consulting relationships turned into a full-time job. That's not a fluke. That is exactly how it's going to work for you.

Not every story is a straight line up, and I want to give you one that isn't, because the lesson in it might be the most useful of all. His name is John.

John had built a great career: first at Motorola, then a high-level role at Nokia. And one day, out of the blue, a recruiter called him about a general manager job at one of the hottest, fastest-growing companies in telecom. The role was exciting. The money was exciting. John took it. And within a year, it was the worst job of his life. Because the CEO turned out to be one of the most difficult people he'd ever worked for. John had no way of knowing that going in, because he didn't know a single soul at that company. That's the risk in one sentence: you can't see what you can't see until you're already inside. He left after a year: the first time in his entire career he'd ever walked away from a job.

But here's how it turns, because this is the point. Afterward, John became a Phello member, and we did it the right way. He organized his network, he told his story, he started reconnecting. And he spent a summer consulting until one of those relationships turned into a general manager role he stayed in for four years. A great role, for the right reasons, because this time he could actually see what he was walking into.

And there's a related lesson I learned from a different executive, and it might be the most important one in this whole book. He came to me frustrated one day: "Kurt, I used my network to find my last role, and it still didn't work out. Why?" So I asked him one question: when you made that move, how many people in your network were you actually talking to? And he went quiet, and said, "Well... none. I got one call from somebody I knew, it sounded exciting, and I took it."

There it is. Think about it like a business. Would you ever build a product by studying one percent of the market? Of course not. As a hiring manager, you go top-down: you look at everyone who could possibly fit, and then you choose. But as a candidate taking a single phone call, he did the exact opposite. He wasn't engaged with his network, so he had no context, no comparison, no way to know if this was the best move or a disaster. It was a coin flip. And twenty years ago, you could change jobs on one lucky phone call and be fine. Not anymore: companies aren't loyal, and there's no stability to fall back on if it goes wrong. But when you're working your network all the time, everything changes: when that call comes, you can actually weigh it, because you've got other conversations going, other options, real context. You get to make an educated decision instead of an emotional one. And in your fifties, you do not want your career riding on luck. That's what networking really does for you. Instead of

betting your whole career on one lucky phone call, you've got the context to actually judge it.

Now let me tell you a story with several lessons folded into it, because together they show you just about everything.

It starts with a member named Ted. Ted joined Phello in May of 2025, between roles. And what a background: this is a guy who'd led technology at some of the most elite companies on the planet, holding CIO and IT executive roles at Sony Pictures, PlayStation, and 2K Games. But none of that made him immune to what every executive is going through now: the transition, the lack of guarantees, the lack of stability. Ted didn't panic. He came in already believing in networking: he'd been to one of my Art of Networking events, he understood that ninety percent of roles come from somebody knowing somebody, and he wanted to get genuinely good at it. So through 2025 he did the work: he built his Phello website and told his story, he pulled his network into the CRM and organized it, and he started reconnecting. And here's Ted's superpower: he is a wonderful listener. He listened to his network, and those conversations turned into real opportunities: a seat on an advisory board and a role as a CIO Partner with a technology leadership firm, advising companies on their toughest technology challenges. He got deep into the Phello community, and he rebuilt real relationships with people he hadn't talked to in years.

Then, in late 2025, a former colleague, now an executive at Lenovo, reached out. They were building a brand-new team to bring Lenovo's AI to the enterprise, and they wanted someone who'd been a CIO to lead it. A few discussions followed, and they went well. And then... nothing. Nearly three months went by.

And then the phone rang. It was the same executive. "We're ready to hire you."

Ted took it. Today he's leading that AI team at one of the biggest technology companies in the world. Now, I want you to hold onto that three-month silence, because it's one of the most important lessons in this whole book. A contact is not just the conversation you're having in the moment. Networking deepens old relationships and builds new ones, and that takes time. If you try to shortcut it, if you treat it like a transaction, you'll get treated like a commodity right back. Ted spent month after month meeting people (on Zoom, on the phone, face to face, over lunch) with one goal: building long-term relationships and helping each other.

But that's only the first half of the story, because there's another Phello member named Chris.

Chris had a long, successful career in telecommunications, a lot of it at Cisco. And then he did something unusual: he left the industry entirely, for three years, to help his wife build a real estate business. They made it a big success. But eventually he was ready to come back, and he joined Phello in April of 2025. Now, I want you to really think about how hard his situation was. Three years out of the industry. Out of touch with his contacts. Out of telecom while the whole world shifted under him: the technology, the AI, all of it. If Chris had gone to a job board or called a recruiter, the answer would have been simple: no interest. You've been gone too long.

So Chris did it the right way. He built his personal website inside Phello and, for the first time in his career, actually told his story. He pulled thirty years of contacts into the CRM and organized relationships he'd let go quiet. And he leaned on the training to relearn how to present himself digitally and what to actually say when he reached back out to people he hadn't spoken to in years. Chris also added his own twist that I love, because it

shows real self-awareness: he didn't just listen to what his network needed, he was honest about what he needed to catch back up on. He took classes. He learned the new technology. He spent 2025 helping people in his network in whatever way he could, while quietly getting himself current again. And like Ted, he leaned on the Phello community every step of the way. Because I'm a big believer that the next great phase of career development is executive communities, execs helping execs, and having that around him made all the difference.

Now here's where the two stories become one. Chris is an engineering executive. Ted is a CIO. And over about ten months inside Phello, these two got to know each other. Really know each other. Because that's what the community is for: putting great networkers in the same room until real relationships form. And this year, Ted hired Chris onto his new AI team at Lenovo.

Think about that. A man who'd been out of the industry for three years just got hired into a state-of-the-art, multibillion-dollar company's brand-new AI group: by another member he'd never even met until they both joined Phello. Chris had the experience. But what made the difference was trust. Ted had gotten to know Chris, come to respect him, and come to trust him.

That word is the whole thing. The reason job boards and recruiters and LinkedIn feel so hollow is that there's no community in them, and no trust. And I'm telling you, trust beats "perfect on paper" every single time. I would rather hire someone I trust than someone who checks every box (and so would you) because we all know that six or eight or twelve months into any job, everything changes. The role evolves. The company evolves. So I don't need the person who looks flawless on a resume. I need the person I trust to grow with us. And you cannot read trust off a LinkedIn profile. You earn it by knowing someone.

So be patient with this. Networking is a process, and great things happen to the people who respect the process. Think about building a house: the person who takes the time to design it and engineer it and build it right ends up with something that lasts, and the person who tries to shortcut it ends up with a hundred problems. Your career is no different. The patient, thoughtful, good listener creates the better opportunities. The person trying to shortcut it with a job board gets what shortcuts always get you. Ted and Chris are exactly what it looks like to do this right.

And then there's Ines.

Ines joined Phello in her early seventies. Let me say that again. Her early seventies. She'd been a high-level executive in the wireless world her whole career, and if you know that world, you know how few women ever made it to the top of it. She had to be tough to survive in a room full of men, and she was. Ines had one of the most aggressive personalities I've ever worked with. I used to have to gently tell her to dial it back a notch. I loved her for it.

She was not done. Not even close. And the first thing I told her was the thing I tell everybody her age: don't worry about your age, your network is not going to care. But I asked her for one thing. I said, Ines, this first time through, I need you to do exactly what I tell you. I'm the expert at this. Just trust me.

So we did. We organized her network down to the people she'd truly met over the years (directors, VPs, C-suite), and she landed at about three hundred and fifty executives. We told her story. And then we sent the letter. No pitch. No "I'm looking." Just hello, I'd love to reconnect, how can I help you.

And the most amazing thing happened. Out of three hundred and fifty people, do you know who responded first? The CEO who had fired her ten years earlier.

And he wasn't cold about it. He was thrilled to hear from her. "I'd love to catch up. Let's have breakfast." So they did. And they rebuilt a genuine, warm relationship, a decade after he'd let her go.

I've thought about that moment a hundred times, because of what it teaches. When you've got twenty, thirty, forty years of relationships, you have no idea what was really going on for those people when you knew them. That CEO might have been going through a divorce back then. A health scare. A miserable stretch in his own job. People are different outside of work than they are inside it: I know I am. If you'd met me twenty-five years ago, I was a lot more aggressive than I am today. So stop assuming you know what a relationship is. You don't know who liked you, who didn't, who needs you now, or who's been quietly hoping to hear from you for years.

Here's what you've actually been doing your whole career without realizing it: building a reputation. All those people have an opinion of you. And when you finally reach out, you're going to find that most of it is a really good opinion. It's one of the most powerful experiences an executive can have. Ask my members who responded to them first, and more often than not it's somebody they worked with twenty years ago.

And Ines? In her mid-seventies, she built a wonderful run of consulting, advisory, and board work: not because she chased it, but because she had a deep network and a fantastic reputation, and she maintained them. That's the whole thing right there. Someone in her seventies with more opportunity than she knew what to do with, for one reason: she kept her relationships alive. Even the man who fired her wanted to have breakfast.

And here's the thread that ties all of them together, and it's the most important thing I can tell you: don't wait. Norm figured this

out at sixty and it changed his life. Ines didn't start until her seventies and built the best run of her career. There's no such thing as too late. But imagine if they'd had this at forty-six. Imagine where you'd be at fifty-five if you started today, while everybody else is just then hitting the wall, updating a resume, discovering their age is a problem. Don't wait until you're sixty to figure this out. Do it now. That's the whole message. The ideal time to start this was thirty years ago. You can't go back and do that. So the answer is today. Start now.

I want to end with one more story. It's the most important one I know, and it changed the way I think about everything I do.

A while back, an executive from my own network reached out to me. He wanted to get back in the game and start a search, and he was exactly the kind of person this book is about: somebody I'd known across more than thirty years in high tech, reconnecting now through the network. But as we got to talking, he told me what he'd really been through. He'd left his company because he'd been diagnosed with cancer. And not just any cancer. It was so rare that his treatment was a clinical trial, him and seventy-nine other people who all had the same thing. Of all eighty of them, Michael was the only one who lived.

You can imagine what something like that does to a person. Michael had come through it with a tremendous amount of faith. Faith had become the center of his life. And he wasn't broken by any of it. He was rejuvenated. Genuinely excited to get back out there and contribute again.

So he joined Phello, and I took him through the whole process. The first thing we did was build his personal website, and he told his entire cancer story on it. It was one of the most powerful things I have ever read. He didn't just list his career. He talked about what he'd been through, how it had impacted him, how it

had shaped the person he'd become. That is what a website can do that a resume never will. It lets you be a whole human being.

Then we organized his network, and he started reaching out the way I teach everybody to, leading with "how can I help you?" And after everything he'd just lived through, he didn't just use that line. He meant it, all the way down. The first two or three months, the response was incredible. He was reconnecting with people from thirty-five years of his career, catching up, and the opportunities started coming. Consulting, advising, even full-time conversations. But honestly, the opportunities weren't really the point for him. He was having the time of his life just helping people, supporting his network, creating things for other people. He was thriving.

Then, about a year later, he called me out of the blue. And he said, "Kurt, I just want you to know, my cancer is back. And this time I'm not going to make it. It isn't the cancer that's going to take me. It's that my organs won't survive the next round of chemo."

I was quiet. I was sad. And then, gently, I asked him what had made him call me, because I knew how personal this was. He told me the only other people who knew were his immediate family. And then me. I have never felt more humbled in my life than I did in that moment, and I asked him honestly why he would call me specifically, and bring me into something this personal.

Here's what he said. "Kurt, when you go through what I've gone through — and what I'm about to go through — you come to understand what actually matters. You taught me how unbelievable it is to reconnect with the people from my past and help them. And for whatever time I have left, that is exactly how I want to spend it. Giving back to my network. Helping people in any way I can, for as long as I possibly can. You gave that to me.

And I wanted to call you personally and tell you, because I need you to know how important this is. Not just for me. For every executive you teach. What you've built at Phello matters."

Michael passed away not long after that call.

I think about him all the time, because he taught me the thing I now tell every single member I talk to. When you go through this process, the part you will be most grateful for will not be the full-time job. It won't be the consulting role or the board seat. It will be the reconnecting itself. The people. The chance to influence someone, to support them, to give a little back after a whole career of your own. That is the most meaningful part, every time, for everyone, because we are human and we want to stay in touch. And it is the very thing this digital world has quietly taken from us, buried under LinkedIn and job boards and recruiters. The human connection.

Michael knew that better than anyone I have ever met. His story is a big part of why I am so driven to make Phello everything it should be, because this was never really about finding a job. So understand that, if you understand nothing else in this book. What we are doing here is so much bigger than that. And when you go through it yourself, you'll know it too.

PART FOUR

The Invitation

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Where Do You Start?

By now you might be feeling that mix of inspired and overwhelmed: you believe it, you know your network is the answer, but thirty years of contacts is a lot, and you're not sure where to put your hand first. Let me make it simple. You don't have to do everything. You have to do the next thing.

There are really only three moves, in order.

First, get your story down. Before you talk to anyone, you write down who you are: the whole arc of your career, the roles, the choices, the wins, in your own voice, as a story and not a resume. It sounds like the least urgent step; it's actually the most important. It forces you to think about your own value before you have to talk about it, and (I've watched this happen again and again) it's genuinely therapeutic. Most executives finish it and feel, for the first time in years, proud of what they've built.

Second, organize your network. You pull your connections out of LinkedIn and, for the first time in your life, you actually see it: thirty years of people, sorted, in one place, like a scrapbook of your career. Not five thousand strangers. The few hundred people you've truly met, who already know you.

Third, reach out. Not to sell. Not to ask for a job. Just to reconnect: "it's been too long, I'd love to catch up, how can I help you?" And then you listen. That's the whole first move, and that's it.

And here's the part almost everyone gets wrong: you don't have to be perfect the first time. None of this is a final document.

Your story is a first draft you'll keep adding to as you go. Your network will teach you things you'll fold back in. Start messy. Just start.

Then comes the part that separates the people who get results from the people who don't: rhythm. Networking is not a one-time push you do when you're desperate. It's a habit you pace across the year. There's a natural rhythm to it: you re-engage your network at the start of the year when everyone's setting goals; you sharpen how you talk about yourself; you lean into consulting and advisory conversations through the busy seasons; you ease off in the dead of summer when nobody's around; you come back strong in the fall, which is the best networking season there is; and you close the year by simply wishing your network a happy holiday, with nothing to sell at all. Do that for a couple of years and something quietly remarkable happens: you look up and you've become consistent. You've built the habit most executives never build.

None of this requires a platform. But I'll be straight with you, because I always am: this is exactly what we built Phello to make turnkey. The website to tell your story, the CRM to organize your network, the training to know what to say, the community to keep you accountable, and a whole calendar of themes so you're never staring at a blank page wondering what to do this month. The point isn't the software. The point is that you don't have to invent all of this from scratch, and you don't have to do it alone.

So that's where you start. Story, network, reach out. Then keep the rhythm. Everything else in your career grows from there.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Your Turn

Let me bring this all the way back to that kid in the Southern Tier, because everything I believe was already there, I just didn't have words for it.

The reason I got through college wasn't that I was the smartest. It's that I surrounded myself with people who were. The reason I was any good on that basketball team was the four guys next to me. The reason I was any good at tennis was my brother pushing me and my coaches believing in me. My wife has driven me to want a better life. My kids. Every bit of who I am came from the people around me.

Your network is what got you where you are. Whether you noticed it or not, almost every job you ever landed came from somebody who knew you. Every person you've met over all these years has touched your life and your career in some way. You just stopped tending to them. Life got busy, you got loyal to your company, and those relationships went quiet.

I'm not asking you to do anything hard. I'm asking you to stop neglecting the most valuable thing you own.

So here's your turn. Not a program, not a pitch: just the thing itself. Go find the people you've already met. Reach out to one of them this week, and don't lead with what you need. Lead with hello. Lead with how can I help you. Listen more than you talk. Then do it again next week, and the week after, whether you need anything or not, until it's a habit instead of a fire drill.

Because here's what I know after more than twenty-five years of watching this work, without a single exception. The people who network get the better opportunities and have the more stable careers. The people who neglect their network struggle. That's it. That's the whole game.

You spent your whole life being good at what you do. That was never the question. The only question left is whether you'll be as innovative about your relationships as you've always been about your work.

I think you will. And the moment you send that first hello, something starts that you can't take back.

Your story has now started.