



Networking Isn't Personal Anymore — With Four in Five Professionals Calling It Transactional

The shift is reshaping how people build careers, signaling a growing desire for deeper, more meaningful professional relationships.

OKLAHOMA CITY, March 25, 2026 — A growing majority of Americans say networking no longer feels like relationship-building but a thinly veiled transaction — and new survey data shows just how pervasive that discomfort has become.

According to a recent Express Employment Professionals–Harris Poll survey, 79% of U.S. hiring managers and 75% of job seekers say networking today feels more like a business transaction than a genuine personal connection.

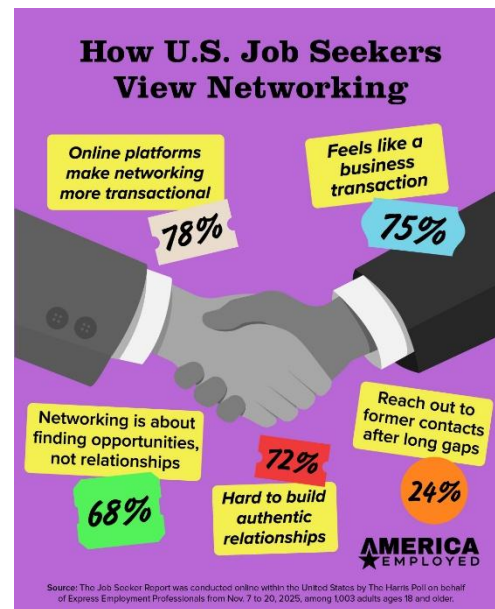
At the same time, 84% of job seekers say networking is primarily about identifying job opportunities — not building relationships — revealing a widening gap between what professionals want networking to be and what it has turned into.

And the problem goes far deeper than awkward small talk.

Tech Is Making Networking Worse

Online platforms were supposed to make meeting people easier, but instead, they've introduced a new layer of artificiality.

- 78% of job seekers say online networking platforms have made interactions more transactional.
- 84% of hiring managers agree.
- Even though 59% of hiring managers think these platforms make authentic connections easier, most admit the interactions still feel impersonal and opportunistic.



- 72% of job seekers say it's difficult to form authentic relationships in environments where the goal feels transactional from the start.

And perhaps the most telling figure: 85% of hiring managers now evaluate networking contacts based strictly on their influence or usefulness.

In other words, the “what can you do for me?” energy is unmistakable.

Younger Workers Feel It the Most

Gen Z and millennials — the generations most fluent in digital networking — are also the ones most likely to say it feels shallow, performative or forced.

- Nearly 1 in 3 Gen Z job seekers (32%) say they reach out to old contacts for leads or references despite not speaking for long periods.
- 34% of Gen Z strongly agree that building meaningful connections is difficult in transactional environments, making them the most likely group to feel alienated by networking norms.

Their concerns echo a broader trend. In separate national research by [Freeman](#), 91% of Gen Z professionals say in-person events are essential to building real interpersonal skills, and over two-thirds believe technology has left them feeling less connected at work.

The Return of Real Connection

While nearly all hiring managers (92%) and job seekers (84%) agree networking is critical for getting a foot in the door, there's mounting frustration with how it's done.

The disconnect is clear. People want opportunity, but they don't want to feel like a commodity.

With 81% of hiring decision-makers agreeing that authentic relationships are difficult to build when networking feels transactional, both sides appear ready for something different.

“The most valuable connections in our professional lives come from showing up with authenticity and a genuine interest in others,” said Bob Funk Jr., CEO, President and Chairman of Express Employment International. “When we approach conversations with openness rather than expectation, we create the foundation for relationships that grow over time. Technology can help us meet, but it's our human commitment to listen, engage and invest in people that gives those connections lasting worth.”

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Survey Methodology

The Job Insights survey was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals from Nov. 3 to 19, 2025, among 1,002 U.S. hiring decision-makers.

The Job Seeker Report was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals from Nov. 7 to 20, 2025, among 1,003 adults ages 18 and older.

For full survey methodologies, please contact Sheena.Hollander@ExpressPros.com, Director of Corporate Communications & PR.

If you would like to arrange for an interview to discuss this topic, please contact Sheena.Hollander@ExpressPros.com, Director of Corporate Communications & PR.

About Robert (Bob) Funk Jr.

Robert (Bob) Funk Jr. is the Chief Executive Officer, President and Chairman of Express Employment International, a global staffing franchisor founded and headquartered in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. He leads a portfolio of workforce solution brands, including the flagship Express Employment Professionals franchise, along with several affiliated brands serving specialized markets. The Express franchise brand is an industry-leading, international staffing company with franchise locations across the U.S., Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

About Express Employment Professionals

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