

Career Growth in a Tough Market

Participant Guide · Professional Development Series

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This session is designed for people who show up ready to do the work. Let's get started!

 Early & Mid-Career Professionals	Building momentum, whether you are 2 or 12 years in. The fundamentals apply at every level.
 Career Pivoters & Explorers	Looking for a new path or an alternative lane in your industry. Your experience is not a limitation — it's leverage.
 Innovators & Problem-Solvers	People who want to make things happen, not just wait for them. You see solutions where others see obstacles.
 Technical & Practical Thinkers	You want the <i>how</i> , not just the <i>what</i> . This guide is built around action, tools, and frameworks you can use immediately.
 Those Who Want Real Talk	Real people, real stories — not AI-generated career advice. We're sharing what actually works, from experience.

Market Reality 2026

Why Strategy Matters More Than Ever — Competition is fierce, but the right moves put you ahead.

Before we talk tactics, let's look at the numbers. These are not abstractions — they describe the playing field you're already on.

74% of employees say learning new skills is their top career priority	~60% of jobs are filled through networking — not job boards
3× more likely to get hired with an employee referral	85% of positions are filled through personal & professional connections

 **Reflection: Where are you currently in your career journey?**

Real Stories: Different vs. Better

The paths we didn't take are not failures — they're forks.

“If I Hadn't...”

Every fork in the road that felt like a setback became a foundation for something else. The layoff that led to the startup. The rejection that led to the better fit. The "wrong" job that taught the right skill. These stories are not about luck, they are about **staying in motion**.

“If I Had...”

The promotion you didn't get pushed you into consulting. The city you didn't move to meant you were home when it mattered. We romanticize the road not taken, but we can't know where it ends. The path you're on is the only one you have data for.



Key Principle

"Different requires learning. Better is a judgment you get to make later — usually much later than you expect."

Framework for Reframing Your Story

- Become **multi-faceted**, not narrowly specialized — your range is a feature, not a flaw.
- Each "wrong" role teaches something the "right" role could not — embrace the curriculum.
- Your path is data. **Use it. Don't apologize for it.**



Reflection: Think of a setback or unexpected fork in your own career path. What did it teach you?

The World Right Now

Before we talk strategy, let's name what we are actually dealing with.

Challenge	What It Means for You
 AI Is Changing Everything	New tools, new roles, displaced jobs — and a lot of noise about what it all means. The rules are being rewritten in real time. The candidates who adapt fastest win.
 Unclear Job Market & Listings	Job posts are vague, titles are inconsistent, and ATS filters can bury great candidates before a human ever sees them. Strategy matters more than volume.
 Generational Misunderstandings	Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z — all in the same workplace, with different expectations, communication styles, and definitions of work. Navigating this is a skill.
 Challenging Economy & Life Demands	Cost of living, student debt, caregiving, burnout. You are not imagining it — the external pressures are real and heavier than ever. We see you.

This is the landscape. Now let's talk about what you can actually do.

Part 1 of 3 · Navigating the Job Market

Strategy · Stand Out · Application Game Plan

Stand Out in a Competitive Field

Being qualified is not enough, you need to be *visible, prepared, and strategic*. Use this checklist to audit your approach.

- Treat your job search like a job — set daily goals and track applications.
- Tailor every resume and cover letter to the specific role and company.

- Identify your durable, transferable skills and lead with them.
- Target companies whose values align with yours — not just open roles.
- Prioritize clarity over speed — reflect on what energizes you, not just what's available.
- Position yourself as the solution — understand the company's pain points and show your value.

 **Notes / Examples — What do you do differently than most applicants?**

Your Application Game Plan

Step 1

Research — Deep-dive the company before you apply.

- Financials & recent news — know how they're performing.
- Culture & values — find authentic alignment.
- Pain points — identify the problems you'll solve for them.

Step 2

Tailor — Customize every application to the role.

- Mirror keywords from the job description to pass ATS filters.
- Quantify impact — use numbers, percentages, timeframes.
- Lead with value — what you've done, not just your duties.

Step 3

Apply with Intention — Quality always beats quantity.

- Target roles that excite you — enthusiasm reads in interviews.
- Write a compelling cover letter — concise, story-driven, specific.
- Show the fit — connect your experience to their needs directly.

Step 4

Follow Up — Most candidates skip this. Don't be one of them.

- Thank-you note within 24 hours — personalized, not templated.
- Reference the conversation — one specific detail from the interview.
- Stay persistent, stay professional — follow up, not chase.

PRO TIP — The STAR Method

Use the STAR method to frame every interview answer. Turn every response into a compelling, evidence-backed story.

Situation (S) — Set the scene

Task (T) — Describe your responsibility

Action (A) — Explain what YOU did

Result (R) — Share the measurable outcome

Practice — Write a STAR answer for your most impressive accomplishment:

Situation:

Task:

Action:

Result:

Part 2 of 3 · Expanding Your Skills

AI Fluency · Data Literacy · Hard & Soft Skills · Learning Roadmap

Skills to Build for 2026 and Beyond

#	Skill	What It Means for Your Career
1	AI Fluency	Master prompt engineering and AI-assisted workflows to work smarter and faster. AI literacy is now a baseline expectation in most industries.
2	Data Literacy	Read and communicate data with confidence using Power BI, Tableau, and visualization tools. Data-informed decisions drive every level of business.
3	Emotional Intelligence	Grow self-awareness, empathy, and composure under pressure — the hallmarks of great leaders at every level.
4	Digital Communication	Write clearly and concisely; command virtual rooms with polished presentation skills. Remote and hybrid work has made this non-negotiable.
5	Adaptability	Cross-functional thinking and hybrid-work fluency; thrive in any environment. The most resilient professionals are the most employable.
6	Personal Branding	Build a compelling LinkedIn presence, share thought leadership, and maintain a standout portfolio. Visibility creates opportunity.

Hard Skills vs. Human Skills

 Hard Skills (Technical)	 Human Skills (Soft)
Data Analysis & Visualization (Power BI, Tableau, SQL)	Emotional Intelligence (EQ) — self-awareness, empathy
AI & Automation Tools — prompt engineering	Storytelling & Persuasion — move people to action
Project Management — PMP, Agile, Scrum	Active Listening & Collaboration — build trust
Cloud Platforms — AWS, Azure, Google Cloud	Problem-Solving Under Pressure — stay calm, decide
Industry-Specific Certifications	Leadership & Initiative — drive projects forward
Coding & Digital Literacy — Python, no-code tools	Resilience & Adaptability — bounce back, pivot fast



2026 Insight

Employers rank soft skills as **equally important** as technical skills. The most competitive candidates master both sides of this equation. Don't build a lopsided profile — invest in both columns above.

Your 4-Phase Learning Roadmap

Phase 1 — Assess (Week 1–2)

Identify skill gaps vs. your target roles using job descriptions and industry reports. Know exactly where you stand before you build.

Phase 2 — Learn (Month 1–3)

Take online courses on Coursera, LinkedIn Learning, or Udemy. Earn micro-certifications. Focus on one or two skills at a time — depth beats breadth at this stage.

Phase 3 — Apply (Month 3–6)

Use new skills on side projects, freelance work, or at your current job. Build a portfolio. Learning without application is just information — apply it.

Phase 4 — Showcase (Ongoing)

Update your resume, LinkedIn, and portfolio. Share insights online to build visibility. The best professionals never stop at Phase 4 — each showcase reveals new gaps to assess.



Pro Tip

Repeat this cycle continuously. The loop never ends — and that's the point. The professionals who embrace lifelong learning become indispensable.

My Learning Plan

Top 2 skill gaps I've identified:

Course or resource I'll start this month:

How I'll showcase new skills:

Part 3 of 3 · Building Your Network

LinkedIn · Outreach · Events · Community · Relationships

Remember This

"Networking isn't just for job searching — it is a career-long practice. Start building relationships now, before you need them."

70% of jobs are filled through networking

1 in 5 hires comes from an internal referral

1–2 connections away from your next opportunity

How to Build a Network That Works

#	Strategy	How to Do It
1	Define Your Goal	Mentorship, job leads, or industry knowledge? Clarity drives better outreach and stronger connections. Know what you're building toward.
2	Optimize Your LinkedIn	Professional photo, compelling headline, keyword-rich summary, and active daily engagement. Your profile is your first impression — make it count.
3	Quality Over Quantity	10 meaningful connections beat 500 cold ones. Invest in depth, not just numbers. A well-tended network is far more valuable than a large one.
4	Give Before You Ask	Share articles, make introductions, celebrate others publicly — generosity builds trust fast. Be someone people are glad to know.
5	Attend Events & Webinars	Arrive early, ask open-ended questions, and follow up within 48 hours while you're top of mind.
6	Join Communities	Industry Slack groups, Discord servers, alumni networks, professional associations — find your people and show up consistently.

"Your network is the sum of the people who know your work, your character, and your potential."

The Art of Reaching Out

How to make contact that gets a response.

Step 1

Find the Right Person

Research who to connect with: hiring managers, alumni, thought leaders, or mutual connections. Quality targeting saves time and increases response rates.

Step 2

Personalize Your Message

Reference something specific — a post they wrote, a shared interest, or a mutual connection. Keep it short: 3–4 sentences max. Generic messages get ignored.

Step 3

Make a Clear, Modest Ask

Ask for a 15-minute virtual coffee chat or one piece of advice — not a job. Low-friction asks get far more replies. Start small; build from there.

Step 4

Follow Up & Stay in Touch

Send a thank-you note after connecting. Check in every 1–2 months with a relevant article or update — relationships need nurturing to survive.

Sample Outreach Template — COPY & CUSTOMIZE

"Hi [Name], I came across your [topic] and was really struck by [specific detail]. I'm currently [your situation] and would love to ask you one question: [specific question]. Would you be open to a 15-minute chat?"

- **Best time to send:** Tue–Thu, 8–10 AM for highest open rates
- **One clear ask only** — multiple requests dilute your message's impact
- **Warm beats cold** — mention a mutual connection whenever possible

My Outreach Plan — 5 people I'll contact this week:

Action System: Getting Into Action

The system that keeps you moving — even when motivation fades.

RULE #1

"The best time to start was yesterday. The next best time is today. Miss a day? Fall off the wagon?"

See Rule #1."

- Learn from the past — don't get stuck in it.
- Momentum is built by **returning**, not by perfection.

Your Daily System — 5 Steps

#	Action	Why It Works
1	Get Organized, Get the Numbers	A simple spreadsheet to track every application, status, and follow-up date. What's tracked gets managed.
2	Eat the Frog First	Do the hardest, most important task before anything else. Every single day. Decision fatigue is real — protect your best hours.
3	Build a Routine with Milestones	Set weekly targets. Make them visible. Tell someone — accountability is free and incredibly effective.
4	Every Day. Yes, Every Day.	Consistency beats intensity. Short daily action compounds faster than weekly sprints. Show up even on the hard days.
5	Expect the Unexpected	Build the system around reality, not ideal conditions. Life will interrupt. Your system should survive that.

 **My Accountability System**

My accountability partner:

My weekly target:

Part 4 of 4 · Building Your Personal Brand

Online Presence · Thought Leadership · Portfolio · Reputation

Three Mindset Shifts

 **Job Hopping = Multi-Skilled**

Every role you've had taught you something the next employer needs. Reframe the narrative: you didn't jump around — you built **range**. That range is now your competitive edge.

Always Learning

Any job today requires learning new things. The ones who lean into that — not just tolerate it — become indispensable. Curiosity is a professional skill.

Expect the Unexpected

Build your career around a version of yourself that handles disruption, not one that requires calm. The most resilient professionals build for the real world, not the ideal one.

What One Role Actually Builds

Example: Teaching — what it actually develops:

Public Speaking	Curriculum Design	Staying Current (AI, Gen Z)	Deep Field Expertise
Multitasking Under Pressure	Long-Term Credibility	Willingness to Serve	Relationship Building

These skills transfer to: consulting · training · operations · leadership · content · policy · product — and more.

 **Reflection: List 3 "unexpected" skills you've built from roles or life experiences:**

30-Day Career Growth Challenge

Start with yourself — then move to the market.

Days 1–7: Know Yourself

- ☐ Answer: What makes me, me? Skills, values, energy.
- ☐ Define what I actually want — not what looks good on paper.
- ☐ Map roles that match who I am, not just what I know.
- ☐ Identify 3 industries where my skills transfer.

Days 8–18: Build & Connect

- ☐ Refresh resume and LinkedIn to reflect my full story.

- ☐ Reach out to 10 real people — no cold blasts.
- ☐ Attend one event, webinar, or informal meetup.
- ☐ Start one skill-building course or side project.

Days 19–30: Apply & Move

- ☐ Apply to 5 tailored, researched positions.
- ☐ Follow up on everything — silence is not a no.
- ☐ Track every application in a spreadsheet, update daily.
- ☐ Schedule two informational interviews with real people.

Your Career Growth Action Plan

The right opportunity doesn't wait — but the right preparation will make sure you're ready when it arrives.

Navigate the Market

- ☐ Treat the job search as a deliberate strategy, not a numbers game
- ☐ Tailor every application to the specific role and company
- ☐ Clarify your value proposition — know what makes you the solution
- ☐ Target roles aligned to your strengths that energize you

Expand Your Skills

- ☐ Identify your top 2 skill gaps today using job descriptions
- ☐ Commit to one online course this month — start this week
- ☐ Build a visible portfolio: projects, case studies, or writing
- ☐ Balance hard technical skills with high-impact soft skills

Build Your Network

- ☐ Reach out to 5 people this week — warm or cold connection
- ☐ Optimize your LinkedIn profile — photo, headline, summary
- ☐ Attend one industry event or webinar this month
- ☐ Follow up consistently and generously — give before you ask

Personal Branding Strategy

- ☐ Your Brand Story — narrative framework
- ☐ Content Strategy — building your thought leadership
- ☐ Portfolio Building — making your work visible

Resources

Curated tools, platforms, and certifications to support your growth — to be updated.

Online Learning Platforms

Coursera — coursera.org
 LinkedIn Learning — linkedin.com/learning
 Udemy — udemy.com

Certifications to Consider

PMP (Project Management Professional)
 Google Data Analytics Certificate
 Microsoft Azure / AWS Fundamentals
 DABT (Diplomate, American Board of Toxicology)

Books & Tools

Hoopla — may be available through your local library
 Exam Prep resources

My Action Items & Next Steps