

The Short and Sweet Guide to Networking

Why should I network?

There is a common quotation about establishing a career “ It’s not what you know but who you know and who knows you that matters.” The ability to use contacts for discovering opportunities and helping you to make decisions, (i.e. networking) is probably the single most important skill you can develop to be successful in life. You don’t have to have friends in high places to be able to network - you can learn to do this effectively even if you think you have no useful contacts at all.

This guide will explain how networking can help you at every stage of your career planning and job hunting process. It will show you how to develop contacts and make effective use of them. It has been designed to be used with a range of other resources about networking, available in the Career Development Centre - these are listed on the last page and referred to throughout the leaflet.

What is networking?

The idea of networking is to approach your own existing contacts, or contacts of people you know, for help and advice. Every time you make a new helpful contact you then tap into their network and get introductions to a new range of contacts. Through this method you gradually build up a large list of people who can help you.

If you are to succeed in applications and interviews for types of job that you have not done before, you will need a very clear idea of what the work is like. Networking is the best way of gaining this knowledge. Most job vacancies aren’t advertised in national or local newspapers. Jobs are often filled either through personal contacts or through specialist publications. You’ll need contacts who work either in the organization or in the industry to hear about these jobs.

Questioning someone about the job they do should give you a better idea of what is involved and whether you would like this work. Your contact may also be able to organize some work shadowing (i.e. unpaid work observation) for you. Because no training is required for this, it is possible to witness the work of people in senior management positions. Work shadowing might lead to work experience or even a job.

You can get your contacts to -

- Outline the range of jobs within their field and the level of competition for them.
- Look through your CV, suggesting improvements.
- Advise you on other skills or experience that you might need.
- Recommend other sources of information and advice, including their own contacts.
- Tell you which papers and agencies to use for vacancies.
- Give ideas of firms to apply to
- Let you know about openings within their firm.

When you first make contact, however, ask for information and advice - NOT for a job.

If you’re not sure about networking, remember -

- You’ve probably already used networking skills, e.g. in finding a vacation or weekend job.
- There are many established networks that you can use.

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- Most people are flattered to be approached for advice.
- If you don't use contacts, you'll lose out to those who do! Many people establish successful careers through networking.
- It never hurts to contact someone (tactfully!) for help - they can always say no.

What do you need a network for?

Are you trying to find a mentor? Are you looking for guidance on a career path? Are you trying to break-in to a job market?

What is your current network?

Listing your contacts, starting with connections that you already have. You may not realize it, but it is likely that you already belong to many useful networks. Obvious examples are -

- Your extended family.
- The university, school and colleges you have attended.
- Clubs and societies that you've belonged to.
- Places that you have worked.
- Your parents' or partner's networks of friends.

It is likely that the contacts that will be easiest to make and most helpful to you will already have some link with you, however slight.

Step 1 - Start to identify your contacts by "brainstorming" a list of all the networks you have belonged to, expanding the list above to include every circle of friends you can think of (e.g. people you've met on holiday, mates at your local pub etc.). Also try to think what other networks might be attached to those listed.

Step 2 - List all individuals known to you within the groups you've identified. Have any of these people worked in jobs or for firms where there might be someone doing the kind of work that might interest you? Even if you can't think of individuals who could help you directly, someone from within these groups is likely to know somebody who could give you some advice. One of your contacts may belong to a well established network, such as a Rotary club.

As you think of new individuals and groups, add them to your list - this will continue to grow as you network.

Developing contacts from scratch

There are many other people with no connection to you at all who may be able to offer you advice. Those most likely to be helpful are people whose job role involves providing help and advice. Try to concentrate on people you can telephone or speak to face-to-face as not many people have the time to reply to letters or e-mails.

> Courses and events are a good way of meeting people who could give you advice e.g.

- Graduate recruitment fairs
- Careers information fairs
- Specialist recruitment fairs for specific industries
- Trade fairs
- Conferences and short courses

When attending any of the above events take copies of your CV with you.

How can you make effective use of your current contacts?

To be successful, you will need to plan your networking campaign at every stage of the process and keep good records of all that you've done. Be aware of what your contacts could do for you.

These outcomes are grouped into six main categories, according to the type of support being offered:

- Self Reflection & Awareness
- Action Planning
- Acquisition of Knowledge and Understanding of Opportunities
- Experience and Observation of Work Activities
- Increasing Access to Contacts, and Information
- Skills Development

Before you start contacting people for help, decide what you want to get out of your networking campaign. Research each contact, their role and their organization, before making an approach. You will impress a contact more at a first meeting if you already have some relevant knowledge. If you have found out about a contact through someone you know, then you should be able to get some background information on the individual.

Prepare a list of questions for each discussion. You'll have to find a method of approaching contacts that works for you and adapt this to each situation.

Some points to consider -

- A particular method of approach may be acceptable to one contact yet not to another.
- The better you know someone, the more informal you can be in your approach to them.
- The better your communication skills the more success you will have with direct approaches.
- Contacts will often have a lot less hassle responding to a telephone call than replying to a letter or email. Most mail you send won't result in a reply and any response may take weeks.
- Telephone or face to face inquiries usually result in some kind of immediate feedback.
- Before you telephone a contact, write down what you are going to say and keep this by you.
- It is possible to combine a written approach with a direct or telephone approach, e.g. you can e-mail each contact a copy of your CV to introduce yourself and arrange to phone them on a specific day.

Nobody likes to be bothered by nuisance calls or junk mail. Here are some tips for making sure you don't come across like an unwanted salesperson!:

- Start with contacts who have a fairly direct link to you - they're more likely to want to help.
- Only approach people for whom you have a definite name.
- Clarify how you got the contact and outline the help you need.
- Always ask initially for "help and advice" NOT for a job.
- Don't be too pushy!

You should also write to thank each contact for their help. Remember all contacts you make should reinforce your image as a professional. Even if you know a person socially, when networking for career purposes, BE PROFESSIONAL in your communication.