

Networking for career planning and job search

The ability to use contacts for discovering opportunities, and helping you to make decisions, is one of the most important skills you can develop to be successful in life. You don't need friends in 'high places' to be able to network; you can learn to do this effectively even if you think you have no contacts at all. Networking will help you with every stage of your career planning and the job hunting process.

This guide will explain:

- What networking is: its importance and benefits
- Where to find people to network with and how to make effective use of them (the 'information interview' approach)
- How to approach people when networking (the elevator pitch)
- How to build professional relationships with contacts.

What is networking?

The definition of networking is to "interact with other people to exchange information and develop contacts, especially to further one's career." The idea of networking is to approach your existing contacts or new contacts for help and advice. Every time you make a helpful contact, you can tap into their network and potentially have access to their contacts. In this way, gradually, you begin to build up a wide range of useful contacts which then become part of your network.

This process is reciprocal and it is good practice to give back to your network and support people when they contact you for help and advice. You may find you can share your own experiences in areas that others need help with.

Why network when planning your career?

By expanding your network of contacts, you can potentially access a wide range of advice and support to plan your career from people working in your chosen industry. It will also enhance your professional development as you learn more about the sector you are interested in.

What are the benefits of networking?

Effective networking will help you to:

- Learn more about the role, routes into the profession and current issues within that sector
- Get noticed and stand out to potential employers
- Develop confidence and knowledge which will appeal to potential employers
- Gain work shadowing and/or experience.

Further resources on Mind Mapping

Website:

www.mind-mapping.co.uk – this site contains a thorough range of Mind Mapping resources.

Books:

The following titles, along with other books on similar topics by Tony Buzan (the inventor of the mind maps), are available in the Loughborough University library.

- Mind Mapping – Tony Buzan
- The Mind Map book – Tony Buzan with Barry Buzan

Mind-Mapping software

A wide range of mind-mapping software tools are available. The Loughborough University Centre for Academic Practice currently recommends the use of Spiderscribe, a free web-based tool. Look at the following e-learning blog to find details of how to access and use this tool:

<http://blog.lboro.ac.uk/elearning/?p=2242> University

How do I approach a contact or network?

Do your research and prepare

Research each contact, their role and their organisation if possible before approaching them. As well as giving you background information, this will impress the individual.

Decide what you want to get from the conversation with your contact and prepare a list of questions that you want to ask, or a list of things you want to know about. This will help prompt you and (time permitting) ensure you have your answers covered by the end of the conversation.

Introduce yourself and arrange a meeting

Explain where you got their name and contact details and briefly outline the purpose of your enquiry. If you have met them face to face, then mention where you met each other. Whilst an email is fine for establishing initial contact, try and arrange to time to speak on the telephone or face-to-face. If the contact doesn't respond, try again a few weeks later. If you still have no luck, don't hassle them - try another person!

The ideal goal is to set up an 'information interview'.

Conduct an 'information interview'

An information interview is an opportunity for you to speak with your contact (either in person or over phone/web) and ask questions to get an understanding of their job role and insight into their experiences in the sector. It is good practice to have an idea of what you would ideally like to get from your meeting or conversation as this will help steer you. Here is where doing your research and preparing is critical.

Example questions you could use include:

- “Can you describe your current role?”
- “What are the most and least satisfactory aspects of the work for you?”
- “What skills/qualifications/experiences were vital in getting you into this career area?”
- “What are typical career paths in your field?”
- “What are the main lessons you have learned in building your career so far?”
- “How is your profession changing?”
- “What advice can you give me on ... getting into this career, further research etc.?”
- “Might it be possible to spend a day work-shadowing you or someone in your organisation?”
- “Is there anybody else it might be useful for me to speak to?”
- “Are there any professional associations I could join to help me to build my contacts?”
- “What practical qualifications do you suggest I acquire to help me get into your field?”
- “Can you suggest useful sources of information for finding work placements, jobs etc.?”

Some additional example questions can be found here:

www.careeronestop.org/jobsearch/network/informational-interviews.aspx

Remember that this is not a recruitment interview to get you a job or opportunity so make sure your asking questions based around developing your knowledge rather than a sales pitch to get a role. Having said this, towards the end of your information interview you could ask your contact for a work shadowing or work experience opportunity.

Follow up your conversation

Always follow up your discussion with a thank you email. Make notes about the conversation and follow up any action points. Use discretion and consider what should and shouldn't be divulged to other people in your network, particularly if you are approaching rival organisations.

Summary

Networking is a valuable skill which is likely to help you not just now but throughout your career. It can at times require practice and perseverance, but with the range of opportunities available to you during your time at University, you will have the chance to give it a go. If you have any questions regarding networking, you can book a Quick Advice appointment with a member of the Careers Network team to seek further advice.