

Developing your Network

Have your friends found work through someone they know? If so, they have used a skill which can be invaluable in helping you achieve your personal and career goals.

What is networking?

Networking is essentially about making contacts. All of us already have informal networks that we call upon all the time in everyday life but we may not have thought about how these contacts can be used (or extended) for career development. Networking can be effective on a personal level, or increasingly students are using social media as a vehicle for expanding their networks.

What can networking achieve?

In the context of career development, networking can help you to:

- Understand the breadth of roles available in your sector and the skills and experience employers seek. This can help you decide if a particular career area might suit you.
- Develop industry knowledge, finding out more about the companies in the sector as well as current trends and issues: all this will help you to make more informed applications
- Access advice from those with experience in your field
- Research suggests that over 70% of vacancies filled are never advertised. Networking is an important tool allowing you to access this hidden jobs market – your contacts may be able to alert you to opportunities you would not have found otherwise.

How do you network?

Although your ultimate goal may be to secure a job or a work placement, it is not a good idea to ask about this directly at the outset, as your contacts may not be in a position to offer you an opening and the relationship may become uncomfortable. Instead the focus should be on asking for information and advice which will help you to make informed choices and targeted applications, allowing others to help you achieve your goals. You could therefore ask for something which many will be able to provide – 20 minutes of their time to give you the benefit of their experience.

Getting started

One of the first steps is to draw up a list of people you know. This could include friends, family, lecturers/tutors, former/present colleagues, fellow students, people

you meet through everyday activities, clubs/societies or people in your community.

The next step could be to consider what your initial objective is – what do you want to know about and in what way might these people be able to help you? It could be that some cannot support you directly, but in that case you could ask them if they know anyone within their circle who might be in a position to help. If so, add this person to your list, make sure you follow them up, letting your new contact know who it was suggested that you approach them. In this way you effectively have an introduction which will increase your chances of a positive response.

Depending on the circumstances you may wish to email or write to your new contacts to request a brief meeting, or perhaps to call them, although this can be problematic as you may well call at an inconvenient moment. If you choose to write or email you could include a brief summary of who you are, some information on your career plans and above all a clear statement of why you are contacting them and what you are asking them to do. As mentioned above a request for a brief meeting or call to seek advice or information is a good starting point and in the case of a new contact, keep the request formal, concise and polite, as first impressions are always important.

Another possible avenue for extending your network is to attend relevant meetings, presentations, conferences or events. These may be organised by the careers service, the Alumni Association, academic staff, or professional bodies, and such events present a good opportunity to meet those who have industry expertise. It is good to prepare by finding out about the organisations represented, thinking through what you will say about yourself, identifying your objectives and considering a few key questions to ask. Again keep a note of contacts for follow up.

Questions to ask your contacts

Below are some examples of questions that you could ask during your discussion. Bear in mind that your contacts time is limited, so prioritise in case you run out of time.

About their Work Role:

- How would you describe a typical working day?
- What are your main responsibilities?
- What skills are important within your job?
- What do you enjoy the most/least?
- Has your role met your expectations?

Getting in:

- How did you get into your current role?
- What do you think recruiters are looking for?

- Are there any obvious gaps in my experience and what could I do to address them?
- How to people find work experience or jobs in this field?

About the Organisation:

- How does your organisation fill entry level vacancies
- How is the job changing?
- Does the organisation face any particular challenges at the moment?
- How do you see your career progressing with the organisation?

Other questions:

- Can you suggest other people I should talk to?
- Can you suggest training courses that might be useful?
- Are there specialist publications I should look at?

If appropriate and if time permits you could ask for feedback on your CV, but as this can be time consuming it may not always be possible.

After your meeting always send a thank you letter as this reinforces the positive impression which hopefully you will have created, and ensures that the person has your contact details should they want to get in touch with you at a later stage. Also follow up any leads they give you, otherwise they may feel that you did not value their time/advice.

Additional Resources:

The Careers & Employability team run regular workshops on networking. See our [Eventbrite](#) page for details.

Login to [Your Careers Portal](#). Refer specifically to the “Job Hunting” module as well as the “Elevator Pitch Builder” (accessed via the “my Resources” tab).

The [Career Player](#) site, specifically the video “It’s not what you know”

Target Jobs “[Networking Tips for Graduate Job Hunters](#)”

The [Career Mentoring Programme](#) provides students with an opportunity to link to a mentor in their field. The scheme is typically “live” in October/November and then again in March. Check the webpage to see if applications are currently being accepted

See also our information sheet on using social media as a networking tool.