

Networking

Networking is a highly valuable activity for both career planning and job searching. By effectively communicating with useful contacts you can:

- gain first-hand industry knowledge from current professionals
- improve your visibility and career progression in a particular field
- demonstrate your skills, commitment and initiative
- find voluntary or work experience to enhance your marketability
- access positions that are never advertised: the 'hidden' job market.

ESTABLISHING YOUR NETWORK

How to get started

The good news is that it is likely that you are already on your way towards establishing your network. Your network is simply all the contacts you have with whom you can share ideas, advice and support. This includes, for example, your family, friends, university lecturers, work colleagues, contacts from voluntary work or societies, and so on. To network effectively you should make the best use of your existing contacts by thinking about how they can help you move towards your desired career goal, as well as thinking about who else it might be useful to be in contact with - ie how to expand your network.

Identifying your objectives

Before contacting someone in your network it is useful to think about what you are looking for and who is able to provide it. For example, are you:

- looking for a general overview of the opportunities available in an industry?
- wanting to find out more about specific roles?
- looking for advice about the application process?
- hoping to source some relevant work experience?

Consider the questions that you would like answers to and who is best placed to provide you with what you need. Can some of your existing contacts provide you with information? What types of person would it be helpful for you to approach for a new contact?

Making new contacts

- A good place to start is to identify potential contacts that you share something in common with. For example, many universities operate an alumni system to enable students to make contact with previous graduates who may already be developing careers in sectors of interest to you.
- Another useful strategy is to be introduced to new

people through your existing contacts. Ask those you have contact with if there is someone they know who may be able to help further with your enquiries - this is the easiest way to grow your network and you can use your new mutual acquaintance as a way in.

- One of the easiest ways to meet lots of contacts in a short period of time is to attend careers events, conferences and fairs. These can be a good way of engaging with contacts who may be able to answer some well-prepared and intelligent questions about their field of work. In order to make the most of these events, get a list of attendees beforehand. Knowing who you want to meet means you can find out more about their organisation, background and interests. Good networkers will always try and find common ground with people they are interested in meeting. Go to drinks receptions and mingle in coffee breaks; contacts are often far more amenable when they are relaxing in an informal environment. Ensure you make a note of new contacts and follow them up through an email or letter.

ONLINE NETWORKING

Make use of online networking tools:

- **LinkedIn.com** is a popular choice of site for professional networking. You should fill out your profile with your work history, skills and interests as you would on your CV. You can include a link to your profile in your email signature or on letters so that new contacts can find out more about you if they wish. Build your network by inviting friends, work colleagues and university alumni. Through them you can be introduced to other professionals working in areas similar to your own.
- Sites like **Facebook** and **MySpace** are more informal environments, useful for maintaining contacts with university friends and personal contacts as they too become professionals. Some graduate recruiters will have pages on there for you to ask questions about their graduate schemes. While valuable on a social level, pay careful attention to privacy settings and regularly review the content on your pages to ensure it matches your professional image.
- **Discussion Boards** and **forums** can be a great way to learn about current issues. The websites of professional bodies often have forums relating to their particular companies, and you can find active discussion groups within LinkedIn.

- **Twitter** is also growing in popularity, with strong networks in many career areas where you can follow professionals in their day-to-day working life and get the latest sector news. (*Charity, Marketing, Law, PR, Advertising and Information Services have good representation on Twitter - but this is subjective and liable to change.*)

CREATING NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to taking advantage of networking opportunities that are organised by your university or professional bodies, such as conferences and events, you can take the initiative and set up meetings with useful contacts yourself. To find out about the jobs they do, you can through this:

- Test your expectations about the job role / sector - is it as you imagined it might be?
- Learn where you might fit in - how well do your skills and interests match those required?
- Help to clarify your career goal - is this what you really want to do?
- Identify a job-seeking approach - how do you get into this profession?

Some tips for approaching these meetings:

- It is often most useful to talk to a person in a role that you could aspire to in the shorter-term - rather than a director, for example, who may be further removed from the work that you are likely to be doing initially.
- Research beforehand so that you can appear knowledgeable about the company and sector. This will help you prepare a sensible list of questions so that you do not ask about information that could be easily found on the company website etc.
- Approach the meeting with a clear idea of what you want to get out of it.
- Treat the meeting like you would a recruitment interview: dress smartly and arrive on time.

YOUR NETWORKING APPROACH

The way you approach a networking situation will often determine how successful it is likely to be.

- It is worth remembering that making the most of people you meet is often a mutually beneficial process. Many organisations actively recruit through contacts made during the networking process, thereby eliminating the need for job adverts and expensive recruitment agencies.
- Concentrate on developing a relationship with each new contact - rather than treating them simply as a potential job lead. Show genuine interest in what they have to say; let them know you would value their advice. People enjoy talking about what they do and the fact that you are interested will reinforce to them the value of their work. It is not usually appropriate to approach the

subject of a job vacancy at an initial meeting. Stay in touch with your new contacts, for example by thanking them for their help and updating them on your progress.

- Present yourself professionally. Introduce yourself with a smile and firm handshake. If your contact is surrounded by others, ask if you can join them. If appropriate, ask tactfully for a short meeting. Be aware of your body language; appear confident and attentive. Do not monopolise your contact's time and avoid criticising your colleagues/institution.
- The art of good conversation involves skilled questioning. Ask open questions that allow the conversation to grow, not just those that require a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Potential examples include:
 - How did you get started?
 - Can you describe what your job involves?
 - What do you most/least enjoy about your job?
 - How would you describe the culture of your organisation?
 - Can you give me an insight into what it is like to work for such a large/small organisation?
 - How competitive is the job market?
 - Where do you advertise vacancies?
- If the conversation is progressing well, you may feel confident enough to take your questioning further:
 - Are there any opportunities for work experience, volunteering or temporary work?
 - Is there anyone else who you think it would be good for me to talk to?
 - Can I mention that you recommended that I speak to them?

FURTHER INFORMATION

- *Personal Networking: How to Make Your Connections Count*, Mike Cope, Pearson Education, 2003
- *Vault Guide to Schmoozing*, Marcy Lerner, Ed Shen, Mark Oldman, Hussan Hamadeh, Samar Hamadeh, Vault, 2002
- *Networking for Job Search and Career Success*, L. Michelle Tullier, PhD, JIST works, 2004
- www.quintcareers.com/networking.html for articles on all aspects of networking.

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