



Networking is a word we hear a lot, but what does it actually mean? Networking may also be called “informational interviewing”, “employment research”, and “career counseling”. Put simply, **networking is the process of maintaining existing relationships and getting to know people who can help you develop your career prospects.** Your network might consist of the resources, organizations, and people that you have developed professional relationships and connections with that can help create opportunities for professional development, collaboration, employment, or promotion.

Your network is probably already bigger than you think. Even if you have never formally “networked”, here is a list of people who you might already have a personal or professional relationship with:

- Past or present co-workers, colleagues, managers, supervisors, or employees
- Past or present clients and customers
- Alumni of your high school or college
- Acquaintances you know from your personal life
- Acquaintances you know through your spouse or your family
- People from your church, gym, yoga studio, or community organization
- Past or present teachers or professors
- Anyone you meet and have a productive, professional conversation about your career path



### Why is Networking Important?

Networking is important for many reasons. Although networking is not meant to immediately get you a job (it’s not a job interview), having conversations with people in your network can help you discover opportunities or career paths that interest you. You can also get firsthand information about the realities of working within a particular field, industry or position.

## Here is what networking could do for you:

- Create an opportunity to gather information (not ask for a job!)
- Provide an opportunity to talk with people and discover your career goals
- Help you understand what a job or company is really like from someone in the field
- Allow you to remain in contact, and on good terms, with people who have influenced you professionally
- Learn whether a specific job is for you – or if it isn't! It's always helps to know what you don't want to do.
- Foster genuine connections with people in the workforce (quality, not quantity!)
- Let you meet new people in your field of interest
- Get more comfortable with professional interviews – it will help when a formal job interview comes around

The list could go on, but networking and going on informational interviews, (an informal conversation you can have with someone working in an area of interest to you) can have many hidden benefits. **Although there is no guarantee, an informational interview may lead to a job prospect.** That is because many job openings are never listed or posted online. Instead, many jobs are often filled internally or via word of mouth. Therefore, you never know when a conversation with someone in your network could lead to job recommendation.



For more on what professional networking is and how to start networking, read this article: <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/professional-networking>

## The Process – How do you network?

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### 1. Define your purpose

In order to start networking, it is crucial to have an idea of the kind of information you are looking for.

The first thing to remember is that just like resumes and cover letters, networking should be tailored and deliberate to focus on a career or position that you're interested in.

Is there a particular job or company that you are interested in learning more about? Is there a broad career field, like sales, marketing, or HR that you want to explore? Or rather, is there an industry, like construction, tech, or hospitality, in which you are curious about? If you're unsure about what exactly you want to do, is there someone who knows you well who could help you identify careers that could work for you?

It can also help to talk with people you know about what they do, if you are unsure about your own career direction. Learning about what someone in your network does for a living can help you discover careers you weren't previously aware of.



Reflection question: Define your own purpose. Think about your career goals. If you aren't sure, think about your strengths and values. What kinds of jobs reflect your strengths, values, and interests? If you aren't sure what career path to start down, networking is a great way to learn more about it and to see how well it fits with your goals, lifestyle and values.

## 2. Identify contacts

Once you have identified your purpose for networking, it is then time to think about who to network with.

Brainstorm a list of people in your life that may be able to help you further your career: relatives, friends, neighbors, organizations in the community, supervisors, teachers, service providers, caseworkers, mentors, etc. You will also want to consider individuals who have experience in something you have an interest in or want to learn more about. That way, you will have plenty of questions to ask them and it will be easier to engage in conversation.



Reflection Question: Consider who is already in your network. Write down 5 people in your personal or professional life that you could have a conversation about your career path with.

## 3. Do research

Once you have contacts, make sure you are knowledgeable about what they do and where they work. People are much more likely to help you if they can see you have put in time and effort! Be prepared to tell people a little about yourself, and why you are interested in what they do. If you have a case worker or service provider, it may be appropriate to ask them to help you get in contact with people as well.

Many professionals will have a LinkedIn profile, so it might be worthwhile to look up your contacts. Your LinkedIn profile is like an online resume, so you can see someone's work history as well as where they went to school and what they studied. Having some background knowledge of where someone works and what they do will help you create some questions about what you want to learn more about.

## 4. Develop questions

If you want to set up a conversation with someone in your network for an informational interview, it is crucial to have some questions prepared so that the meeting is worthwhile for both you and your contact. Think about what questions you want to ask someone will also help clarify your purpose for asking them to meet with you. If you are not very close with this contact, having a list of prepared questions will make your conversation less awkward and intimidating.

Depending on who you're talking to, sample questions include:

- How did you get started in the field?
- What does a typical day look like for you?
- What knowledge and skills do people need to succeed in this field?
- What do you find most/least satisfying about your job?
- What is a typical entry-level job in this field?
- Are there any classes or experiences you recommend if I want to work in this industry?
- Can you recommend anyone else for me to speak with?
- (If appropriate) Are jobs in this field open to hiring people with criminal records?



Reflection Question: Write down a list of 5-10 questions that you want to discuss with one of your contacts that you listed above; these can, and should, change.

## 5. Make contact

Now it's time to ask someone in your network whether they would be willing to meet with you.

Remember, you're establishing a relationship and getting information – not a job. Always be professional and polite and wait to ask your questions until they agree to meet with you. This part can feel really uncomfortable, but fortunately there are ways to make it smooth and professional. Here are some tips for making the ask:

- Keep your introduction short and if you don't know the individual personally, establish any connection you have to them. Who gave you their contact information? Did you attend the same university or work at the same company? Did you meet briefly at a past event?
- Be clear about what you're looking for. Ask for something very specific, and make it as easy as possible for the person to say yes.
- Be considerate of their time and find a way to meet that is convenient for them.
- Make it clear that you want to talk to them for a specific reason, not because you're looking for a job (even if you are).
- Follow up and be politely persistent. If you haven't heard back in a week, reply to your first email and respectfully ask if your contact has had a chance to read your previous email. Also, use this opportunity to reiterate how much it would mean to you to have 30 minutes to learn from them.

Here is a sample way to invite someone to an informational interview:

*Dear Ms. Swanson,*

*I received your contact information from Emily Smith at Vermont Works for Women, who suggested that we be in touch. I am currently preparing my job search, and I am hoping to transition into the landscaping industry. Emily tells me you have been a landscaper for over ten years and have started your own company. I have some experience with outdoor work and landscaping, but I am interested to learn more. Would you be willing to share your experiences with me? I am free Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 2:00-5:00 and would love to meet you for coffee and discuss how you got to where you are today.\**

*Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you! Sincerely,*

*Your name*

\*One thing to note, informational interviews can take place in person, over the phone, or by video meeting. You can ask your contact how they are most comfortable meeting.

If you are calling your contact to request a meeting and you have to leave a voicemail, don't request that they call you back. Instead, close with "sorry I missed you, I'll try again. However, if you would like to reach me earlier, feel free to call me at . . .". This gives them the choice and makes it easier for your contact.



Reflection Question: Choose one of the contacts from your network and write a practice networking letter, based on the sample above, about why you would like to meet with them for an informational interview.

## **6. Meet with people (informational interview)**

Although it's not a formal job interview, it's still important to treat an informational interview with professionalism. Dress appropriately, arrive on time, and come prepared with list of questions and topics you want to cover. Express your gratitude early on and thank them for taking the time to meet with you.

After you have introduced yourselves again and settled in, focus your early questions on the interviewer. Start by asking about their experience in the field, how they got started, what other careers they considered, etc. You should also be prepared to chat about yourself, your past experiences, and your career goals. Remember, this meeting isn't just a time to ask for advice and learn from your contact's experiences—it's also a chance to make an impression.

Don't be afraid to take notes during the meeting, especially if the interviewee refers you to other people to get in touch with. Alternatively, toward the end of the meeting, it is appropriate to ask if the interviewee knows anyone else who could offer you more advice on any of the topics that came up during your conversation.

If you are in the process of looking for a job, try not to be deliberate about it. Instead of asking your interviewee whether they have heard of any job openings, ask "let me know if you hear of anything". The difference is subtle but important because it takes the pressure off the contact.

## 7. Follow up

Finally, always follow up with a thank you note or email, regardless of how helpful the informational interview was. Make sure they know how much you appreciated them giving you their time. If you go on multiple informational interviews, it can help to keep a log of who you met with, their contact information, a summary of what you learned from them, and whether you followed up with a thank you note.

## Other Tips for Networking

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Now that we have outlined the process for networking and setting up an informational interview, there are other things to keep in mind when expanding your professional circle. Here are some additional tips to network like a pro and some common mistakes to avoid.

- **Don't forget to prepare to talk about yourself.** Although an informational interview is a great time to ask questions about someone else's career, it is important to give that person some information about your own background and career interests. Sometimes it can be hard to talk about ourselves, and it is especially difficult to give a quick synopsis of your background and experience on the spot. Consider crafting an elevator speech, which is a short description of yourself that can be given in the time it takes to ride an elevator.

The idea is to give a short summary of your present, past, and future. First, talk a little bit about your current or most recent job and what you did. Then tell them how you got there and any previous experience or education that is relevant to the role. And finally, end with what you're looking to do next or learn about.



Practice your elevator speech before networking so that you are prepared to talk about yourself. Creating an elevator speech is also a great way to prepare for a formal job interview – another reason why networking is good to practice!



For more on how to create the perfect elevator pitch, watch this video:  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qncmc-yx3gl>)

- **Clean up your social media and use it to your advantage.** This is good practice for job searching as well. It is important to make sure your online presence or “brand” is appropriate for professional contacts and employers to see. In fact, many employers will Google the name of a prospective job candidate during the hiring process. You may want to Google yourself to see what comes up. Usually any social media accounts you have will show up first. Make sure that your accounts are only available to the people who you want to see it and that employers are finding what you want them to find, and what they are viewing is appropriate.



On the other hand, you can use social media to your advantage. Use your profile to develop your personal brand, connect with others professionally, and bolster your own reputation with hiring managers. If you haven't done so already, create a LinkedIn profile and update your information regularly to reflect what's on your resume. The site can be used to display your professional history, search and apply for jobs, read company profiles, network with others, join professional or alumni groups, and much more.



For more on how to create a profile and use LinkedIn effectively, read this article: <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/how-to-use-linkedin-2062597>.

- **Always follow up and follow through.** In addition to following up with a thank you note after an informational interview, follow through with any commitments you made. Even if their advice was not particularly helpful, you still want to express your gratitude. Who knows when you will need their job advice again? It is important to remain kind and considerate. Also, remember to offer your help when someone you know needs a new job.
- **Stay in touch with your contacts.** Don't tap into your professional network only when you need something (like a job). It is important to maintain relationships with the people in your network. It would be unfortunate to reach out to someone for a reference or professional favor when they don't remember who you are. You might reach out when it's someone's birthday or to say congratulations when they are promoted or get a new job. Or perhaps you read a book that you think a former co-worker might like. Or if someone in your network helped you get a job, make sure to let them know and thank them.

It's ok if you don't stay in touch with everyone, that is natural. Rather, decide who you want to stay in touch with and don't let those good relationships die.



- **Set networking goals and don't expect results in record time.** Remember, building your network takes time and it probably won't help you reach your professional goals immediately. However, there is a lot you can learn by reaching out to those in your network and meeting new people. It may help to set realistic goals for yourself for how often you want to engage in

networking opportunities. For example, you might want to set a goal for how many new people you want to reach out to in a month. Or you could set a goal for how many people in your network that you want to reconnect with in a month. Your goal might even be just to say “yes” more often when an opportunity to meet new people comes up.

## Conclusion and Reflection

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It is never too late or too early to invest in your network. While the concept of networking may seem intimidating, you are probably already doing it a lot more than you think! You might choose to go on informational interviews or attend traditional networking events such as job fairs, conferences, and alumni events, but there are plenty of other ways to expand your network. These other options include events such as social gatherings at your church, community groups, and clubs. Volunteering is also a great way to meet new people who share an interest in a common cause. All you have to do is start where you are motivated to meet new people with common professional or personal interests.

Networking is a skill that only gets better over time. To expand your network you are probably going to have to step out of your comfort zone. But your hard work will pay off. Whether you get some professional advice, learn about a new career, find out about a job opening, or just get some practice interviewing, there are so many benefits to networking.