

Networking for Your Job or Career

1st August 2020

For some people, the term “networking” means dressing up, going to a formal event and talking about the job market with strangers. Though some networking is done at formal events, networking can actually be done anywhere, such as in the queue at your local coffee shop, helping out at your child’s school, or at the gym. That’s because the essence of networking is really just socialising with people, finding out what is of interest to them, and talking with them about mutual interests. Think of your whole life as one big networking opportunity. Wherever you are, whoever you meet, you may be making contacts that could benefit you in the future.

Whether your professional goal is career advancement, career change, finding a mentor, or just keeping up with what’s going on in your industry, polishing your networking skills and seeking out opportunities to network can help you achieve these goals by increasing your access to experts, information and opportunities.

Identifying networking opportunities

There are a variety of opportunities for “official” networking:

- Professional or trade organisations often hold conferences.
- Schools and universities hold alumni events, have online networks and sponsor get-togethers for people affiliated with their institutions.
- Industries and interest groups organise networking socials in cities throughout Australia. [MeetUp](#) is an online group where you can find many of these.
- Businesses often sponsor events such as book signings or conferences with speakers on various topics of interest.

Many of these events are open to the public, so you may not have to be an alumnus, a patron, a volunteer, or an employee to participate. Another way to find upcoming events is through local newspapers and community bulletin boards or in newsletters from your workplace, online MeetUp groups, or any other organisation with which you are affiliated. Pay particular attention to web-based postings in all these areas, because they can often provide easily accessible and up-to-date information.

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Before the event

The most important thing to do before you go to a networking event is to prepare yourself. Here are several things you might want to do:

Have business cards. Software programs are available that allow you to make and print business cards at home. You can also get cards made at a professional print centre or order them online. Your card should be straightforward and simple, and it should display your current contact information.

Know about the event. Who's hosting the event? What's the purpose of the event? Who'll be attending?

Keep up with current events. Check the local and national news before you leave for the event so you'll know what's been happening that day and throughout the week. The day's events are a good way to begin conversations, though in general, it's usually a good idea to try and avoid topics like politics and other potentially controversial subjects.

Dress appropriately and comfortably. Avoid wearing jeans, shorts or other casual clothing unless that is the appropriate clothing for the event. Generally, it is best to be *slightly* overdressed. Suits are often a good bet in places where suits are common, while business casual is more appropriate in other areas. Keep accessories like oversized bags or briefcases at home or in the car because you'll need to have both hands free to shake hands, hold a drink and write notes. If your suit jacket has pockets, carry your business cards in one pocket and store the cards of any contacts you meet in the other pocket.

Prepare and practice introductions. If you're at a wedding, for example, you might say, "Hello, I'm Greg, a cousin of the bride." At a charity event, it might be appropriate to say, "Hi, I'm Greg. I help at the soup kitchen on Saturdays." Of course, not all introductions are appropriate for all situations. Think about your audience, who will be attending the event, and what you want them to know about you, and prepare a few possible introductions ahead of time. Then practise out loud to yourself or ask a friend to role-play with you.

Set networking goals. If your goal is to meet five new people, keep this in mind and make sure not to spend too much time talking with any one person. If your goal is to meet a

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specific person whom you know will be at the event, decide how you will approach him or her and prepare an appropriate introduction. For example, "Hello, Jeanne. My name is Carolyn Smith, and I really enjoyed reading your book *Networking Genius*. Do you have plans to publish any other books?"

At the event

Get there early. Arriving early will let you get settled and comfortable. If there is a check-in table with name tags, you might take some time to inspect them to find out who is expected to attend.

If you'll be wearing a name tag, attach it to the upper right-hand corner of your jacket, blouse or shirt, just below the shoulder. This will allow your outstretched greeting hand to lead the eye of the person you're shaking hands with directly to the name tag.

Scope out the room. Make note of details such as where the food is, where the toilets are, what the traffic patterns are likely to be, and who's already arrived.

Decide who you'll approach. Watch for body language signalling that people don't wish to be interrupted, and don't interrupt them. You can always speak with them later. You can also look for another person standing alone. They're likely to be grateful for someone to talk to.

If you come to an event with a friend or meet a friend there, make an agreement not to spend all your time with one another. Catching up with your friend at a networking event defeats the purpose of being there, which is typically to meet new people. Discuss the reasons both of you have for attending the event, and then branch out. And if you meet someone you think your friend would be interested in meeting, you might say, "You have so much in common with my friend Chris. Let me introduce the two of you." Your friend can do the same for you.

Having a networking conversation

Whether you love getting to know new people or you dread being in a room full of people you don't know, having good conversations is the key to networking effectively. Here are

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some tips for networking in person and by phone:

Always offer a firm handshake when being introduced or when introducing yourself. A bad handshake can leave others with a negative opinion of you before you've said anything.

Try to develop a rapport with the person. Be a good listener. Ask open-ended questions. Your goal is to get the conversation going and to make the person you are speaking with interested in talking with you. One good way to do that is to be interested in what they have to say.

Listen. Make an effort to really listen to the person you're having a conversation with. If you are meeting in person, make and keep eye contact and don't let your eyes wander to see who else is in the room. Try to make the person the centre of your attention. Concentrate on what he or she is saying. Make thoughtful comments in response.

If someone isn't giving you a positive response or if you're getting the "cold shoulder," move on. And don't let it discourage you, because it isn't necessarily about you. You don't know what other events are going on in a person's life that could be affecting their mood.

Informal networking

In addition to formal networking events, there are many opportunities for networking at informal events and during daily interactions. Typical places for these opportunities include:

- the gym, a sports club, a team
- your school or your child's school
- book clubs, gardening clubs or parks
- your town or city (neighbours, shopkeepers or anyone else you interact with on a regular basis)
- social organisations you belong to or volunteer for

Events with a sports focus, hobby groups and volunteer groups often bring people from different walks of life together around common interests. This provides you with an opportunity to expand your networking circle beyond standard industry and professional

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boundaries. People you interact within classes you're taking are likely to be interested in the same areas you are and have a complementary perspective. People you interact with on a regular basis as part of the community (e.g., parents at your child's school, neighbours, shopkeepers, etc.) have interactions with a variety of people. Remember, those you interact with infrequently are just as important to your network as those you interact with frequently; many opportunities come from people you may not know well at all, because they are part of different circles and hear about different opportunities.

Following up

Send a thank-you note. It may seem antiquated, but as a general rule, it is always a good idea to send an email following up on a conversation and confirming that you have the person's correct information. It's even better if you can use the email to provide them with the information they were looking for.

File any business cards or contacts away. Before you do so, use the back of the card to jot down any information or details that will help you remember the person or your interaction with them.

Follow up. Having a conversation and getting a business card is just a beginning. To make this new contact work for you, you have to make an effort to continue the new relationship.

It's important to realise that networking is a two-way street. As you meet people and network for your own goals, others will be doing the same. Even if you don't feel that you have much to offer, it's likely that others will be interested in meeting or networking with you. Being friendly, being yourself and extending professional courtesy to everyone you meet are all important factors in successful networking.