

What is a professional network, and what is networking?

A network is a group of social and professional connections who can help you learn more about careers, employers and opportunities in a given industry. Networking is talking to people about your background, what you're doing now, and what you're looking for in a career.

Although a job search involves many activities, none of them is as important as networking. Many studies have shown that, more often than not, your professional network will provide key information that leads to a position.

A professional network is not a job bank, however. It is a process of establishing and maintaining contacts who can provide you with critical insights for finding the right job. Similarly, networking is not asking someone to hire you or to find you a job. It is a way of making your aims and qualifications known to as many people as possible, creating contacts that may be useful to you throughout your professional life.

Whom should I contact?

- Friends, colleagues, relatives and acquaintances

Make a list of everyone you know: classmates from high school, college and graduate school; friends and neighbors; members of organizations you belong to; past employers; friends of your family and so forth. You should view this group as a web of communication that is already in place, which you only need to activate. Approach people you know well to touch base and catch-up. Contact people that you've met or know by proxy more formally; remind them who you are and how you know them. Consider asking for an informational interview if you're interested in their institution, company or field.

- The very-well-connected

People recognized for having an extensive network of contacts are another important group of networking contacts. This includes your dissertation director, faculty advisors, well-known community or religious leaders or others of public renown. It's best to use this group sparingly when there is a real reason to do so, e.g. a question only they can answer or a referral only they can provide.

- **PACNet** (Penn Alumni Career Network)

Another valuable networking source is **PACNet**, an active database of alumni who have offered to talk to students and fellow alum about their career path and present work. Register for **PACNet**, a service of the Alumni Affairs office linked to the Career Services website, to find potential career mentors.

How do I establish a network?

Develop a short statement that gives people an idea of what you've been doing and what you're looking for. It should be brief and clear, providing enough information to give a general idea about your experience and goals in order to get the conversation started.

Contact everyone on your list. Although you should feel free to call, e-mail is a good way to network, because it gives the person you're contacting a chance to think about their response. Be persistent with email, especially if you're contacting people who haven't heard from you in some time. Remember to use an appropriate description in the subject line of your message.

Maintain accurate records of contacts. Keep comprehensive data about the people you have contacted, including their full name, title, e-mail address, business address and phone number, their assistant's name, etc. Also, develop a way of tracking your conversations. An Excel spreadsheet is a good way to do this.

Stay in regular touch with your network. Begin by thanking them after your first interaction; follow up with another e-mail to let them know that you've found additional information about something they told you, or set up an appointment with someone they suggested. Make sure to let them know of any significant progress you make in the job search: a job opportunity you've found, or even better, an offer that you've accepted. Follow-up is crucial for effective networking.

How do I know I've made progress?

It's worthwhile keeping in mind that networking is a process that works in ways that may not be immediately apparent to you. All contacts that result in new information and additional contacts are worthwhile.

Moreover, through networking, you will learn to focus your search on the right opportunities, develop a more definite career path for yourself and be more confident about pursuing it.

The confidence that you develop will give you a firm foundation for upcoming job interviews. The more you network, the clearer you will be about how your strengths match the requirements of a particular job.

One last thing to keep in mind...

Once you have established a network, keep it alive, both through your current job search and into the future. With what you've learned, you will become a valuable contact for someone else who's just starting out on their own career search!

Recommended Reading

- *Networking Works! WetFeet Insider Guide*, accessible through our website
- Networking section of <http://www.jobhuntersbible.com>, website of Richard N. Bolles, author of the venerable career manual *What Color is Your Parachute?*
- "Coffee in 2002, a Job Offer in 2004" by Susan Basalla May and Risa Nistrom McDonell in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (<http://chronicle.com>), 20 January 2006.
- "Networking, Part I" and "Networking, Part II" by Dave Jensen in *Science Magazine* (<http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/>), 15 August 2003 and 13 September 2003.

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