Networking

Networking is the process of building and maintaining professional relationships with people who can offer support, information, and opportunities.

In this tipsheet, you will learn:

- What networking is and its mutually beneficial nature.
- How to identify networking opportunities.
- Effective networking strategies.

What is Networking?

Networking is the process of building and maintaining professional relationships through connections or by reaching out to new people. Many people find the idea of networking daunting and assume they need to be an extrovert to network effectively; however, networking is a skill which often becomes easier with practice and can be adapted to support both extroverts and introverts.

Networking is a common practice that is generally perceived positively by employers and professionals. It can include attending large events and meeting many new people, but this represents just one aspect of networking. Opportunities for networking also arise through one-on-one interactions over extended periods. Networking can be intentional and deliberate, or it can naturally evolve from interactions with coworkers, peers, as well as family and friends.

Networking is *not* about showing off all your knowledge and skills, introducing yourself to as many people as possible, or landing a job. The focus of networking should be to truly connect with others who can help you in your professional life and who you, in turn, can help with knowledge, opportunities, advice, and support.

Value of Networking

Connecting with others and building strong professional relationships is part of career development and can provide many benefits such as:

- **Career Exploration:** Speaking with professionals can give you a greater understanding of a particular field or industry, the skills needed to succeed in that field, and whether you may like that career path.
- **Career Advancement:** Many job openings and internships are filled by referrals through networks rather than being publicly posted first. People within your network can alert you to these opportunities or influence your chances of obtaining a position.
- **Skill Development:** Interacting with a diverse group of people helps to refine your interpersonal and intercultural skills. In addition, your network can provide important feedback that allows you to develop current or new skills needed to move forward in your career.

- **Knowledge Sharing:** Exchanging information with others not only helps you stay informed about industry trends, best practices, and innovations but can provide important nuanced information about organizations such as interpersonal relationships, workplace politics, and team culture.
- **Providing a Support System:** A strong network can provide emotional support, mentorship, and advice to help you navigate your career.

Identifying Networking Opportunities

Networking can take place in almost any circumstance through casual conversations with family, friends, or coworkers, to networking events, to informational interviews. Actively seeking out opportunities to interact with others can help you expand your network. You can find these opportunities:

- **On-campus:** student organizations and clubs, career fairs, events, classes
- **Off-campus:** volunteer work, professional associations and industry groups, community events, conferences, trade shows
- **Online:** LinkedIn and other professional networking sites, online forums and discussion groups, webinars and virtual events

Active networking requires you to understand your goals (researching job opportunities, understanding a workplace, finding information, practice speaking with others, etc.).* Once you understand your goals, you can identify people or places where you can start networking. Ask your current network (friends, family, peers, former employers, etc.) for suggestions on who else to connect with, since expanding through referrals is a key aspect of effective networking.

*Need help clarifying your goals? Book an appointment with a Career Coach through MyCareer.

Networking Strategies for Events

At conferences, career fairs, or networking events, it is expected and appropriate to start conversation with new people or those you want to build a stronger relationship with. Networking at events requires:

- **Preparation:** Research and know your goals, prepare a brief personal pitch or introduction, have business cards or resumes (for career fairs) ready.
- **Engagement:** Approach and introduce yourself, ask open-ended questions, be a good listener and show genuine interest in the person you are talking with.
- **Building and maintaining relationships:** Follow up with new contacts via email or LinkedIn, keep in touch by sharing updates or finding opportunities to connect in person, offer help or value where possible.

Managing Networking Stress

Networking can be challenging for anyone. Effective networking is a skill that is developed through practice. Not every interaction is perfect or has to be perfect to be effective. The following tips may help you manage some of the stress of networking:

- **Plan:** Research, prepare talking points, practice with friends.

- **Use Alternative Methods:** Rather than going to large events, try one-on-one informational interviews or networking in informal settings.
- **Leverage Strengths:** Connect with people who share your passions. Understand your unique skills and how they can help you create your network.
- **Find Supportive Environments:** Seek out allies and identify mentors, advisors or peers who understand your challenges and can provide support, introductions, or accompany you to networking events.
- **Set Realistic Goals:** Start with goals that are achievable to you such as making one new contact or attending one event per month. Increase your networking activities as you become more comfortable.
- **Focus on Quality Over Quantity:** Aim to build meaningful connections, which often happen in one-on-one interactions, whether at large events or individual meetings. The depth of your connection can be more beneficial than having a lot of connections.
- **Practice Self-care:** Understand and respect your limits. It is okay to decline networking opportunities that you find too overwhelming.

Final Tips

As you refine your networking skills, consider these final tips to maximize your efforts and to build meaningful connections.

- **Leverage Your Existing Network:** Start with people you know and ask for introductions to expand your network.
- **Be Proactive:** Take the initiative to reach out and connect with people.
- **Be Authentic:** Be yourself and build genuine connections rather than trying to impress.
- **Be Organized:** Keep track of your contacts and interactions. Note down important details about each person.
- **Be Professional:** Be respectful and professional in your interactions both in-person and online.
- **Be Mindful of Cultural Differences:** Be aware of and respect cultural differences in networking practices, especially in diverse or international settings.
- **Be Patient and Persistent:** Building a strong network takes time, practice, and effort.
- **Give and Take:** Networking is a two-way street. Offer your own skills and abilities to help those within your network.

Lastly, remember to enjoy the networking experience and be kind and generous with your time when others reach out to you. By fostering genuine connections and supporting others, you can create a network that is reciprocal, valuable, and fulfilling.

Additional Information

- For more on Networking, see our **Networking Module** in the Career Prep OnQ course.
- For more on Informational Interviews, find our **Informational Interview Tipsheet** on our website: https://careers.queensu.ca/jobs-experience/career-support-tips