

# NETWORKING: A Strategy for Every Stage of Career Development

*Networking can serve as a valuable strategy at each and every stage of your career development. What is it? In short, it's simply connecting with people, your most valuable resources at every phase of your pursuits. People can help you to assess your skills and interests; to explore industries and work functions and their intersection with academic disciplines; to learn about challenges and opportunities, the skills required, the jargon, and the trends in specific fields; and they can help you to focus your career or job options. By talking to people, you get **information, advice, and referrals**. And, since nearly 80 percent of all jobs are never advertised, you learn about opportunities that otherwise would go unnoticed. The more contacts you make, the more likely you are to uncover the hidden job market.*

## Types of Networking

When you're networking for information, advice, or referrals and possible job leads, it's most likely you'll be conducting that activity in one of three ways: (1) through purposeful personal contact done by phone, email, business letter, online networking sites, or in person; (2) at a function or an event designed for "schmoozing" or mingling with other professionals; or (3) by happenstance. In all cases, you'll want to be ready. You may be surprised, for example, at the number of internships secured on flights back to school after holiday break through conversations with the stranger in the next seat. So, whether you are working a room at a social event, initiating a purposeful personal contact with someone, or seizing an opportunity that presents itself, you should find the tips below useful.

## Making Personal Contact

Before you actually start making personal contacts, do some homework. Begin with yourself. What is your purpose? Do you have a career or industry focus, or are you seeking contacts who might serve as resources to help you discover your interests and desires? Follow your hunches about the industries and work functions that you think would most interest you, and do some background research that might enrich any conversation or exchange you will have with the people who are actually in that line of work. Continue your homework after defining your purpose and researching industries or work functions by beginning to build your network of contacts, which includes learning as much as you can about the people you will be contacting. Reed's office of career services has a variety of resources that can help you get focused in all of these areas.

Start to build your network by listing your natural acquaintances and contacts:

- Family and their friends
- Friends and their families
- [Reed Alumni Career Network](#)
- Volunteer affiliations (e.g., clubs, organizations, church, etc...)
- Professors, advisers, coaches
- Former or present work colleagues
- Professionals

Ask yourself, "Who do I know?" and add anyone who comes to mind to your list. Your goal at this stage is to connect with your natural network to discover not only if they have direct advice but also if they know of others more closely affiliated with your interests.

Let them know your interests and aspirations. The more people who know of your interests, the greater the chance that doors will open for you. Your chances of being in the right place at the right time are increased when you are attentive to this fact. It's sometimes called "managing your luck."

Before you make contact (with either your natural network or new people discovered through them), prepare your introduction or "elevator speech." This step will also be useful for those unpredictable moments when you are presented the opportunity to connect with someone new (e.g., on the flight home or at a social function).

Examples:

*Dear Dr. Griffin,*

*Professor D. Owl suggested that I contact you regarding your research. I will soon graduate from Reed College with a degree in political science and philosophy. After working this past summer as a legal researcher for a law firm in Anchorage, Alaska, I'm back in Portland to finish my studies and hope to find a job with a local civil rights organization or public policy group. Would you have a few minutes to share any advice or ideas with me?*

\*Elevator speech: who, what, why in 30 seconds.

*Hello (person's name). My name is (your name). I was referred to you by (referral name). I am interested in learning more about (material science, web development, whatever). I wonder if you would have a moment to share with me any advice, ideas, leads, and referrals.*

\*(Taken from *The Foolproof Job-Search Workbook*, by Donald Asher, a Reed alumnus, who has given us permission to use it).

## **Expand your network**

As you meet alumni and other people, focus on shared interests and common traits. Find parallels between your experiences and theirs. Do you share similar interests such as social justice, the environment, or entrepreneurship? Have you studied the same subjects or under the same professors? Identify and accentuate the commonalities.

As you develop a clearer picture of your work or career plans, you can begin to broaden your network of contacts beyond those closest to you. How? As before, people are your best sources. If you can get two to four names from each of your natural contacts, your network will have expanded exponentially. When asking for referrals to other contacts, be specific: "Do you know anyone whose work responsibilities include (duty A, duty B, or duty C)?" or "Can you suggest anyone in this industry or field whom I should contact?" followed by "May I use your name as my referral source?" In some cases, your original contact may even be willing to introduce you.

Other sources for expanding your network include professional associations, many of which have student membership rates, BLOGS or other online networking sites, newspaper articles or other media features, and formal networking programs or events such as the [Reed Alumni Career Network](#) or special events or panel discussions on campus that feature alumni or other professionals. Most important: engage yourself; contribute in your industry of interest. This means volunteering your time and skills to individuals or organizations actively working in the industry of your choice. Establish working relationships with others in the industry and find more contacts. Professional conferences are staffed by volunteers who can position themselves to meet young and senior professionals, for example.

At this point in your cultivation and nurturing of contacts you may be ready use the more formal tool called the informational interview. You may have been employing it already, since you have been talking with others and gathering information to sharpen your focus and expand your network.

## **The Informational Interview**

An informational interview is a meeting, initiated by you, with an individual who has experience or knowledge in your area of interest. It should be undertaken with utmost care and professionalism.

### **Making Contact**

You can make the initial contact by phone, email or a formal letter of interest in which you ask for 20 to 30 minutes or so of someone's time. The most expedient method is by phone or email, but you will have to consider which is appropriate for each situation.

Be clear and concise. Tell the person who you are, what your purpose is, why and how you came upon him or her. A typical contact might sound like this: "Hello, this is Chris College. I received your name from the Reed Alumni Career Network. I am interested in social services and I note you have extensive experience in the field. Would you have 20 or 30 minutes to meet with me sometime so that I might learn more about how you got started, trends in the field, and specific information on your organization?"

You may wonder if people will take time away from their busy schedules to talk with you. They will for several reasons: you have been referred to them by someone they know; meeting with you and others helps keep them informed, up-to-date and well-connected; experts love to share their expertise; and people like to help others because they find it rewarding.

### **Before the Interview**

For the formal informational interview you should do your homework ahead of time. Information on the industry, the organization, even the person you are interviewing should be obtained before you ask for an interview. Prepare your questions in advance, but do not make them so "canned" that you fail to connect genuinely with the person. Dress professionally and bring copies of your resume, but distribute them only upon request.

### **During the Interview**

Arrive 10-15 minutes before your appointment.

During the interview, you are in charge. Restate your purpose and why you are talking to this particular person. Adhere to the original time request of 20-30 minutes. Ask open-ended yet pertinent questions (see below for suggestions), and ask for referrals to other appropriate individuals in the field or in related organizations. Take notes and get a business card from the person.

This is not the time to hand over your resume and ask for a job or internship, although you may have your resume at hand if the person asks to see it. You will be following up with a thank you note or letter, and at that time you can send a resume if appropriate. It is important to understand the difference between an informational interview (during which you are seeking information, ideas, and/or referrals) and a job interview.

### **What to Say and Ask**

First things first: "Thank you for taking time out of your day to meet with me."

Second, restate your purpose: "As I indicated on the phone (in my letter), I am in the process of gathering information and advice about the field of (targeted field). (Name) suggested that I should contact you."

It is also important to state plainly and simply, "I am not here to ask you for a job; I am here to ask you for information."

Your questions will yield more information if they are open-ended enough to engage the person in conversation. Following are possible questions:

- **Could you tell me about your background and how you came to hold your current position?**

The conversation should lend itself to inquiries about educational background as well as the steps in this person's career path. You will be learning how at least one person got to where you think you may want to go.

- **What general skills are required in this line of work?**

This should yield particular contexts in which general transferable skills (which can be products of your liberal arts education) are employed. It also invites the follow up...

- **What specific or technical skills have you acquired in your work?**

Besides yielding what you need to have in the skills department, this question might be followed by an inquiry into the types of training the employer provides.

- **What do you like most about your work (or the field)?**

This question might get at how the person articulates the intrinsic rewards of the work. These are the intangibles, the things that make the person tick and bring joy in his or her work.

- **Are there any responsibilities you would rather give away?**

This is a diplomatic attempt at uncovering aspects of the work that the person does not appreciate.

- **What are some of the challenges of your job?....that the organization faces?...that impact the field?**

These questions are designed to give you clear information regarding the stresses, demands, and probably the opportunities in this line of work. Much work is created to address problems, and these questions will help you begin to articulate how you might be part of the solution to those problems.

- **What is the outlook for entry-level professionals in the field?**

Part of this line of inquiry includes "what is a typical entry-level position in the field (or in this organization)?" and should unveil how someone can get a chance to start.

- **What are the short- and long-term goals of your organization or department?**

Here, you are attempting to get a clearer and current picture of the organization. You should have done enough research ahead of time to know some basics about the products or services and even the general philosophy of the organization. This will take your knowledge a step further.

- **Are there others in this field with whom you would suggest I talk?**

Follow this with, "may I say you referred me?" Make sure you get the correct spelling of the name.

- **I remain very interested in this line of work and will certainly pursue further leads for information and perhaps employment. Do you have any final advice to give me regarding a career in this field? What do you recommend for my next step?**

This statement begins the closure of the interview. It should be heartfelt; otherwise, do not use it. The question allows the person to comment freely, accept or reject the mantle of mentor, and tie up any loose ends.

Finally, ask for permission to stay in touch to let him or her know how your search for information is going, and to learn of potential developments (e.g., **May I keep in contact with you to report my progress?**). If you are granted this permission, follow through!

### **After the Interview**

Send a thank you note or letter immediately and keep the person informed of your progress. This is both courteous and prudent. By keeping in touch you are cultivating new leads while nurturing the relationship for future follow up contacts. Sending someone an article you think might interest them is a genuine technique that demonstrates reciprocity; you're giving back after they've given their time and advice.

Evaluate your style of interviewing as well as the information you received. Summarize the information in writing and date it. Your journal should include specific points that were made in the interview and when or if you will follow up. If you make several contacts during a week, your notes and summaries will be extremely important as you review what you have learned.

Arrange appointments with new referrals.

***Remember, the network can work for you or against you. The impression you leave can make or break your chances of being remembered and referred to emerging opportunities.***

**Etiquette notes:** Always be courteous. Networking must be undertaken with the utmost professionalism. Below are a few points. Consult with a counselor in career services if you have any doubts about what constitutes courtesy and professionalism.

***·In your initial requests, try to acknowledge their busy schedule and how much you appreciate any time they can spare, at their convenience. Offering times in the next week or two is a good practice.***

***·When faced with a situation where the person you're trying to contact does not respond, take the time to follow up on your request, as many as 4 times. Remember, some people prefer phone calls to emails.***

***·AGAIN, SEND THANK YOU NOTES TO ANYONE THAT TOOK THE TIME TO TALK WITH YOU.***

To summarize, here are **10 Steps to Better Networking:**

**Step 1 Have the right mindset - Networking is more like farming than hunting.** You will be more successful in the long run by cultivating relationships with people than by trying to close the deal in a first meeting.

**Step 2 Have the tools to network with you at all times.** These include an informative name badge, business cards, a brochure, or resume. The point is to have them available if the conversation turns to the need for them. Don't just hand them out indiscriminately—that makes them seem less valuable.

**Step 3 Act like a host not like a guest.** A host is expected to do things for others, while a guest sits back and relaxes. Make people feel welcome and comfortable. Introduce others to people you have already met, especially if they have something in common. Meet people who are standing by themselves. If you are in a group, open up to others and make it easy for them to join your circle.

**Step 4 Listen and ask questions.** Remember that a good networker has two ears and one mouth and uses them proportionately. Find out about their business as well as their outside interests.

**Step 5 Give leads or referrals whenever possible.** The best networkers believe in the givers gain philosophy. If you don't genuinely attempt to help the people you meet, then you are not networking effectively. Reciprocity builds the relationship. Success in business is the result of service and relationships.

**Step 6 Small courtesies count a lot in today's world.** A thank-you note or follow-up call after someone has given you a referral shows that you value the relationship and appreciate their efforts. They are more likely to remember you and be interested in helping you again. If you see an article that might be of interest to someone, send or e-mail a copy.

**Step 7 Make a point to meet new people.** While it is more comfortable for most of us to hang out with friends and associates, you are at these functions to meet new people. Get out of your comfort zone. Some networking gurus suggest that you set a goal for how many people you meet or set time limits for how much time you spend with each person. I find these suggestions to be too mechanical. One good contact where you have made a real connection with a person can be far more valuable than 20 people who can't remember your name and have no impression about you. On the other hand, you may need to circulate so you know who is there.

**Step 8 Write notes on the backs of business cards you collect.** Record anything you think may be useful in remembering people or the conversations you had, especially anything you promised to do. If it is awkward to do this at the meeting, stop on your way home or in your car and write down as much as you can remember.

**Step 9 Be yourself.** Be authentic. Remember, you are building relationships that may last a long time. People trust you more when they see a consistent pattern of behavior. And trust and knowledge are the basis of developing a relationship. That said, sometimes it is just better to skip an event if you are feeling under the weather or have just gone through a major break-up in your life. You do want to present yourself in a positive and professional manner.

**Step 10 Follow up!** This is the most important part of networking. Ask for permission to call or e-mail or send information. Then do whatever you say you are going to do. If someone has helped you get an interview or gave you a referral, keep in touch and let them know how things went.