

Networking is critical to cultivating meaningful job opportunities and establishing a professional network. When you network, you are developing personal contacts who can connect you to internships/jobs now or in the future. Networking can be spontaneous, through friends or family or by interacting with someone at an event. Networking can also be planned or structured through arranging informational interviews. Both modalities are effective and can help grow your network.

Spontaneous networking is informal in nature. You could meet someone at a coffee shop, a wedding or a barbeque. You could introduce yourself and tell the person about your career goals, and ask them what they do for work. Let the conversation naturally flow and see if the person has a business card that they can give you so you can stay in touch.

Informational interviews are structured and formal. They are a great mechanism for information gathering and creating a professional connection with someone in the industry of interest. These interactions are planned and strategic. You may speak with the individual in person or over the phone. Ideally, these interviews are not conducted via email. Select your set of questions in advance of the meeting and then proceed to conduct the meeting with your interviewee.

Take advantage of both methods of interviewing because there are advantages to both. Although you may gravitate toward one or the other. It is important to grow your network, so that you have established a “hidden job network” for a time when the “open job network” generates less job opportunities.

IMPORTANCE OF NETWORKING

Most people learn about an internship or job opportunity through their “hidden job network.” Networking is important because it supports whichever career stage you are involved. You may wish to:

- Begin to foster relationships that assist in your career/job/internship search
- Learn about career opportunities
- Practice interview skills and practice discussion that pertains to your career goals
- Gather information about a career or industry that you need to research for decision making purposes

WHICH PEOPLE DO I “NETWORK” WITH?

Connecting with others is the main way to grow your hidden job network, and it may help you progress toward your professional goals. Consider all of the people you know, that your parents know, your friends, their parents, your neighbors, your high school friends, their friends, your college friends, your teachers, professors etc. This list could become extensive and it is okay if these individuals do not work in your field of interest, they may have connections with someone formerly or currently working in your field/s.

UNPLANNED NETWORKING

1. Jamal is at the checkout counter and begins a conversation with the clerk who is wearing a shirt with his favorite band. They begin a brief discussion about music and Jamal learns that the clerk also owns a music studio. Jamal mentions that he is a music major who plays percussion instruments. The clerk knows someone who is looking for a percussionist to serve as an intern in the local area. Jamal leaves the discussion with a new professional added to his network (clerk with studio connections) and the email address of the person looking for an intern (possible internship).
2. Erin is attending her best friend's summer cookout. While she is grilling, a neighbor in Erin's housing development asks her about college and what major she declared? Erin mentioned she was considering business management or marketing and that she was looking for an internship for the summer. The neighbor's company has an internship program and so the neighbor encouraged her to apply to the company's program at the end of the semester when grades were posted. Erin received the business card of the neighbor (grew her professional network) and also a lead on a potential internship (establishing an internship pipeline).

PLANNED NETWORKING

1. Ben is interested in learning more about law enforcement. He has tried using the connections in his hidden job network yet has come up short on locating any contacts in law enforcement. Ben decides to research law enforcement agencies within 30 miles where he can potentially speak with someone in a commutable distance. After Ben's phone outreach he acquires four interested professionals and has arranged to speak with each over the course of next week, (two are in person and two via phone). (Growing his professional network, learning about his career field of interest and potentially gaining a lead on an internship).
2. Sasha plans to attend her college sorority's networking social. She chooses her professional outfit (dress pants, flat dress shoes and a blouse) and has practiced her self-introduction and set of open-ended questions to ask others while socializing. Sasha arrives at the networking event and gives her business cards to the people she meets. Sasha hands out 16 business cards to each person she meets within an hour and a half and collects 13 business cards from others. Sasha plans to thank each person she met at the event via email. (Sasha grew her network by 16 people as a result of the one event).
3. Wesley is attending a career fair. He is prepared and brings his resume and business cards with him to the fair to give to recruiters and hiring managers. He collects business cards, follows up with emails, and LinkedIn connections. Wesley thanks the person for their time and identifies part of their conversation in the note, to help differentiate himself from others who attended the career fair.

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING

Informational interviews are information gathering exercises and networking opportunities. Informational interviews can help you make decisions about a career path, learn about an industry and help you create a professional network of peers with industry advice and potential job or internship connections. It is important to note that when you are conducting an informational interview you are NOT asking for a job or internship. You are asking professional questions about a company, a career path and learning about the person whom you are interviewing.

Your first step when planning for an informational interview is to consider the career field/s or industries you want to learn about and identify potential job titles that are interesting to you or that may fit your major or educational discipline. Locate these professionals online by researching companies, using LinkedIn, professional organizations, using your hidden job network (people you know) or using Google maps to locate possible places nearby that offer the kind of careers you are interested in learning about.

Next create the pitch, make a plan to email, call or stop in to the person/ place that you want to interview with. Whether or not you email, speak or meet with a professional to inquire about a meeting, your pitch will look something like this: "I am a junior Biology major at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and I am interested in learning about careers in veterinary care. I would like to learn about the animal healthcare industry and the medical field. One of the suggestions that my career counselor made was to conduct an informational interview. Would you or someone else here be able or interested in speaking with me briefly about the field. I have 10-12 questions I would like to ask, so I can learn more about the industry, trends and education required to be successful in this kind of work."

The result of asking this question could play in your favor, in which case you would proceed with the next steps below. In the event that your outreach results in a "no" answer- simply thank the professional for their time and wish them well. Preserving your professional presence is important because you never know who will cross your path in the future and you want to ensure that you have left every situation emulating the professional you are proud to be. If the person says yes, then schedule a time to meet with them at a mutually agreeable time and make sure to be as flexible with your schedule as possible.

Get ready for your interview by preparing questions that you wish to ask the professional. Questions may look something like this:

- What is your work like day to day?
- What do you like most/least about your job?
- What kind of preparation does someone need to have to be eligible to work in this field?
- How did you know that you wanted to pursue this career?
- Is there room for promotion or growth in the industry, what should one look for in a company or job of this nature?
- What kind of advice would you offer someone aspiring to be a professional in this field?
- In what locations/countries do opportunities in this field flourish? Where are opportunities most plentiful?
- Are there other professions that you would consider, that are closely related to this field and why?
- What professional organizations do you belong to, or would you consider membership?
- How do you stay current in your field and what trends do you see emerging in the industry?

FOLLOWING UP:

Read your notes and think about what your impression is of the profession, the working environment and consider the credentialing required to be successful in the field. If you are using the informational interview as a tool for making a decision about a major or a career field, take your time, be honest with yourself about your true interest in the field, and your motivation to meet the requirements to be eligible for a professional position.

Within 24 hours you should send a thank you email to the person you interviewed. If you have time and are able, a handwritten note will be equally effective. Make sure to thank the interviewer for their time and expertise, and let them know that you valued their feedback.

No matter your decision about the career field, you have now gained a professional connection to add to your network. Keep this connection by staying connected in LinkedIn, sending emails periodically, or sharing a meal or quick cup of coffee together. Keep that connection "warm" by paying attention to it and not just using it when you need something (like a job, internship, or a connection to someone else). Professional relationships matter, but always people first.