

“IT’S WHO YOU KNOW”: HOW TO NETWORK EFFECTIVELY AS A STUDENT

While this can be overstated, it remains true that knowing the right people can give any jobseeker a very welcome foot in the door. Family connections can be helpful, but what we’re really talking about is networking. If you’re naturally introverted, it’s difficult to suddenly “learn” how to network. That said, there are still several ways to strengthen your case without becoming a social butterfly overnight. It may surprise you to learn that most people genuinely like to lend a helping hand. So, you know you need to network. But how do you actually do that?

Know what “networking” even means in the first place: A network is simply a connected group of things or people. When we talk about networking in the context of career building, we’re talking about the multidirectional exchange of advice, information, and opportunities. Networkers forge mutually beneficial interpersonal relationships that may one day help them to find a new job, distinguish themselves in the workplace, or learn more about a field that interests them. Some networking takes place with complete strangers in restaurants and airports, other networking happens online, and more networking still occurs at formal career-oriented events.

It’s hard to determine the exact number, but more career experts agree that a *majority* of jobs are unadvertised. Even if a job application is posted publicly, knowing somebody “on the inside” can help you to better understand a company’s hiring policies and preferences. Networking has benefits for virtually every profession, but some fields are more network-reliant than others. As a general rule, highly technical, skills-based occupations rely less on networking and more on formal qualifications and competency.

Networking can also be intellectually stimulating. If you’re genuinely interested in the area in which you want to work, meeting people who know about the field and can teach you more about it should be exciting.

Prepare yourself: When networking in a professional environment (e.g. a career fair or similar “networking event”), always dress and groom professionally. Bring extra copies of your resume or CV. To carry your documents, we recommend investing in a “padfolio” or a professional-looking bag that is not a backpack.

Practice positive body language: This type of advice can come across as patronizing, but it’s true. Use a firm handshake, practice good posture, and make direct eye contact. Smile!

Network purposefully: Don’t just try to have conversations because you’re “supposed to.” Enter every networking situation with a clear goal in mind. Are you trying to practice your conversational skills? Secure an immediate job? Learn more about an industry? Know what you want and you’ll have an easier time getting it.

Start on campus: There are plenty of networking opportunities available to students. In many respects, it’s easier to put yourself out there *before* graduation if you take advantage of the right opportunities provided by the University. Participating in on-campus clubs and committees is an excellent first step in the networking world. If you’re in your first two years of study, volunteering or pursuing your interests on campus provides you with the opportunity to meet “upperclassmen” who will have entered the workforce and made their own connections before you’ve left university. Attend lectures and events related to your field as often as you can.

Use the network you already have: One of the benefits of attending a smaller university is the increased access you have to your professors and other campus staff. Don’t be afraid to discuss your academic or career goals, especially if you’re considering graduate school. Your classmates, family members, and friends also belong to your pre-existing network. You may be surprised where your next great job lead comes from.

Embrace internships and volunteer opportunities: At the University of Windsor, the Co-op and Volunteer Internship Program (VIP) services constitute excellent ways to make meaningful connections in the working world. Both avenues allow students to spend productive time in real workplaces before graduation. While they may not lead *directly* to a full-time job after graduation, students who make a positive impression can count on a strong reference letter at the very least. Along similar lines, part-time and summer jobs and volunteering opportunities outside of the University’s programs can be equally valuable. It’s also appropriate to contact former supervisors or employers for leads when navigating the job market.



Be a social media butterfly: Follow interesting companies on social media to keep yourself in the loop. Sign up to newsletters like Workforce Windsor-Essex. When used correctly, LinkedIn can be an excellent resource for aspiring professionals. Please see our other LinkedIn and Social Media resources for further information.

Interview before you get an interview: An *informational interview* can be an excellent way to make connections and learn more about a company, role, or industry from somebody with direct personal experience. You might be surprised that many working professionals in your favourite field are more than willing to lend 15 minutes of their time to ambitious and curious students and recent graduates. Please see our Informational Interview resource for further information.

Get the most out of career fairs: You already go to every available career fair, right? If you want to make a lasting impression, try to connect with recruiters *before* you meet in person. It's often possible to determine which representative(s) from a company will be present ahead of time. Sometimes this information will be publicly available online, and sometimes you can figure it out by placing a quick phone call or email. Send a quick, polite message to the relevant recruiter(s) when the fair is a few days away. Introduce yourself briefly and note that you look forward to meeting in person to discuss your options further. When you eventually do meet, the recruiter will be expecting you and will already be familiar with your general profile. This will strengthen your connection with him or her and immediately give you an advantage over other jobseekers.

Do your research: Along similar lines, use your online resources to learn as much as you can about the companies that will be attending ahead of time. The more you already know, the better prepared you will be to ask meaningful, worthwhile questions. The goal of information-seeking networking is to gather information you can't find through existing sources. Prepare these questions in advance for added impact.

Don't come on too strong: In any networking situation, never outright ask for a job if the possibility has not been presented to you. Listen politely and attentively, and never interrupt. Expect some level of rejection.

Maintain a two-way street: You also have something to offer. Remember names, take cards, and be sure to "pay it forward" when you're in a position to do so. *Listen* to new contacts when they're speaking, and actually take note of what they say. Never burn your bridges with other students, faculty, or employers.

Consider business cards: Personalized business cards are an easy and affordable way to direct new contacts to your various social media accounts, online resumes, blogs, and portfolios – or even just your email address. Create a "job title" that describes where you are in your career at the moment – something like, "Future Social Media Marketing Professional," or "Seeking role in human resources." Don't offer your card coldly to recruiters, though. Allow them to ask for your contact information (or offer you *their* card) first.

Send a thank you note: If you have a particularly meaningful conversation with a new connection (e.g. a recruiter), send him or her a thank you note later that day to express your gratitude for his or her time and help. Aside from being a courteous gesture, this will strengthen your connection. If a networking contact helps you to land an interview or other opportunity, follow up afterward to let him or her know how it went.

Further reading:

- UBC Career Resources: Networking
- Ten Thousand Coffees
- 50 Ways to Get a Job
- The Guardian Student Guide to Networking

Co-op, Career and Employment Services: www.uwindsor.ca/cces | mySuccess: success.uwindsor.ca



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CAREER AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICES OFFERS A VARIETY OF RESOURCES TO HELP YOU LAUNCH YOUR CAREER:

Job searching • Career planning • Work experience • Career preparation workshops • Personal appointments • Resume critiques
Mock interviews • Interest testing and assessments • Job fair and networking opportunities • Volunteer Internship Program (VIP)



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