

Polishing Your Professional Networking Skills

Objective

To increase your ability to effectively network by developing an action plan.

You Should Know

Networking is the act of investing in interpersonal relationships so they contribute to your career or goal and you contribute to theirs. The more time and effort you invest in building a network, the more it helps you succeed and allows you to support others. There are several benefits to effective networking:

- Interacting with new people exposes you to different perspectives and expands your comfort zone.
- It builds social skills and confidence.
- When you share your hopes, goals, and challenges, others respond in turn, and you can support one another.
- The more people who know who you are and what you can do, the more opportunities are likely to come your way.

Networking is a continual, incremental activity. Eventually, when you need something—information, a recommendation, additional contacts, advice—you will have a whole web of people to call on and who may call on you.

Make networking a natural extension of who you are and something you do continually. As with any other skill, do not expect to be good at it right away, and be willing to try, fail, and improve.

With Whom Can You Network?

Past contacts. Think about former teachers, childhood friends, community and religious leaders, your friends' parents, your parents' friends, extended family members, mentors, past and current work colleagues, etc. Is it time to level up your relationships into more mutual, more adult connections?

People you do not know yet. Who is *not* a potential resource? If you strike up a conversation on the street, who is to say it will not be the person who advances your career? More typically, you will make these connections at career fairs, alumni groups, continuing education courses, meet-ups in your area of interest, professional conferences, and social media platforms. But do not discount playgrounds, church, sports groups, etc.

How Do You Network?

1. Meet someone new or contact someone from your past. Show interest, ask questions, and share about yourself.
2. Record their contact information and notes about your interaction.
3. Follow up with your appreciation of who they are and any information they shared.
4. Stay in touch, looking for ways to be of help to them.

There are many ways to do each step, but here are some general tips:

- Set networking goals to meet new contacts and nurture previous ones. For instance, each month attend one networking event and connect with at least four people there, plus contact at least four people you have met previously.
- If you are nervous, jot down some icebreakers or topics to bring up beforehand.
- Attend networking events by yourself. It makes you more approachable, and it is easier for you to mix and mingle with new groups.
- If you are speaking to someone with experience or expertise, do not be afraid to ask at the end of the conversation if they can recommend others in *their* network you should connect with.
- **Listen more than you speak.** It encourages others to share more. You will learn more, build stronger relationships, and become more respected because you have the skill, patience, and maturity to listen.
- **Give and receive.** Networking is a chance for you to share your knowledge and skills, and experience the pleasure of helping someone else. Receiving (or needing) is sometimes perceived as a weakness, but it allows you to be humble, feel supported, and develop relationships more fully—and allows the giver the warm feelings that come with giving. Enjoy both in balance.
- **Follow up.** All of your listening and sharing will not matter if you do not *act*. After you meet someone, follow up with them within 24-48 hours. Send an email or message on social media. Thank them for any information they shared. Mention what you enjoyed about them or what you have in common. Share a resource or connect them with someone else from your network. If you felt a good connection, suggest meeting for coffee next week.

Just say yes to networking opportunities, and always be ready to pay it forward. This worksheet will help you develop an action plan to put these skills into action.

What to Do

Who is in your current network? Use the list above to help you root out all types of contacts you have. Put a star by any that you think might be useful to you right now.

List three people you would like to add to your network that you can realistically contact (not your favorite sports figure or movie star, for instance). Include phone number and/or email address.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What is one action you can take to contact each of them?

Contact each person within the next week. What was the result? Did you follow up? Why or why not?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

List three events you can attend within the next couple of months to practice your networking skills. These can be virtual or in-person events.

What are three challenges you feel about networking? Be specific.

1. _____
2. _____

3. _____

What is one thing you can do to ease each challenge?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
