

What is Networking?

Professional networking is a process by which you expand your knowledge and capability by leveraging relationships with other professionals. The key word is "relationships." Networking also provides a forum for your career advancement.

Think of networking simply as talking with people, getting to know them and letting them get to know you. Networking is all about building and maintaining professional relationships. If you're just starting out, build your network with people you already know well, such as family and friends. As you advance, you will continuously expand your networking circle through people you know and by meeting new people.

Why is Professional Networking Important?

You can become more proficient in your job and industry through your relationships with other professionals, with whom you can consult when you encounter a gap in your own knowledge. When you have a strong network you'll also be in a better position to learn about new career opportunities. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics study, 70 percent of jobs are found through networking.

How Do I Network?

First talk with people with whom you have a good relationship. Ask them to refer you to people you can talk with on a professional basis.

It's important to build rapport before you ask for favors, as networking works best when trust and loyalty are developed. The "law of reciprocity" is important in networking.

The more you put in, the more you'll get out of it. Add value to your professional network by making it mutually beneficial.

As you advance in your career and in your networking efforts, look for opportunities to be a resource for others by openly sharing information.

It's also important not to expect immediate results from professional networking. Trust is built over time.

Where Should I Network?

Although there are events specifically for networking, you can network in a grocery store or sitting in a doctor's waiting room. You might engage in networking in both formal and informal settings, in person or online.

For online professional networking, LinkedIn and Twitter are two social media sites where professionals regularly engage in discussion. On LinkedIn, participate in group discussions, post professional information and comment on other people's posts. Twitter makes it easy to communicate with others. You can tweet to anyone on Twitter, retweet and comment on what people post, and participate in Twitter chats.

Whether you're new to networking or an experienced professional, consider business groups and organizations such as Toastmasters and Business Network International (BNI) for your networking activities. Search online for your local chamber of commerce and attend events. Every career field has professional associations you can join or event you can attend as a non-member.

With Whom Should I Network?

If you don't have a large, expansive network, begin by talking with friends and family members. You might find former co-workers who can help introduce you to people in their networks.

Think about whom you already know who would be willing to help you professionally.

Networking Tips

Don't limit your network

It doesn't matter if someone is inside or outside of your industry, if they are interesting and influential, be willing to commit time and/or resources to meet, connect or help that individual. The most successful people that I've met have the broadest and most interesting range of networks spanning industries, occupations, geographies and ideologies.

Do your homework

Once you've secured a meeting, phone call, or introduction to network with someone – don't mess it up! My personal rule-of-thumb: be prepared with at least two areas of common interest.

Don't ask for anything in return

Networking is not transactional, but too often it's approached in such a way. Play the long game and build the network for the sake of building the network.

Aim high

Often times people miss opportunities to network because they feel intimidated, particularly if the other person is more senior. However, there is very little downside when aiming high, other than a bruised ego from time-to-time. The worst that can happen is they say "no" or ignore you. At that point, it is onward and upward!