

Networking

Networking is about making connections with people who you can contact for information and advice. It allows you to gain valuable insight into areas such as the reality of working in different roles, where to look for work, and what makes applications stand out.

Networking might be something you haven't thought about before, but it may be something you've done already, by talking to a friend of a friend about their job, speaking to an academic about careers, or meeting alumni at events or presentations.

Making contacts

Finding people you share something in common with is an excellent way to expand your network and start the initial conversation. There may be alumni or mentoring programmes you can access through your university, or your contacts may be able to put you in touch with people they know, where you can use your mutual acquaintance as a way in.

Attending careers and industry events is a great way to meet people working in the areas you are interested in, where you can gain first-hand information about jobs and how to improve your chances of being hired. As well as events on campus, look out for conferences, fairs and discussions taking place in your department or across London.

Networking is a key part of attending events, so even if it initially feels strange, it's expected that you'll start talking to people you don't know. You could always pair up with another attendee to build your confidence in asking questions.

LinkedIn, Twitter and online discussion boards are also excellent places to build your contacts and ask questions. Connect to individuals and organisations that interest you and use keyword searches to explore related feeds and discussions you can follow. This is

an excellent method to build your awareness about an industry, which will impress employers at application and interview. Read more about networking online in the social media guide in this leaflet series.

Consider your existing contacts; friends, family, work colleagues, lecturers and contacts from any volunteering or societies. They could let you know about useful resources or contacts, so be open minded to the range of contacts you have and how they might be able to help you.

Knowing what to ask

Whether networking in person or online, it is vital to make a good first impression. Look through the list of attendees and research the people you want to make contact with beforehand, so you are prepared and present yourself in a good light. Before you make initial contact, think about what your objectives are. Do you want to understand more about the industry in general or are you looking for specific advice about making an application?

When introducing yourself mention what your professional or academic interests are or why you are attending the event, and then ask an open-ended question to get the conversation going. Make a note of their name and any key points they make, along with their email address, so you can follow up with them if appropriate.

Remember to dress professionally and maintain eye contact, show genuine interest in what they have to say, and smile throughout (if you're meeting in person). Being personable counts for a lot! Avoid asking something obvious you could find the answer to on their website.

If you are deciding what sort of career area might be right for you, you could ask:

- What made you choose this career?
- Can you describe some examples of the activities that your job involves?
- What is a typical day at work like for you?
- What background experience is useful and how do people typically obtain it?
- How much variety is there in your work?

If you are job hunting you could ask:

- Where and how are vacancies advertised?
- How did you get into this job?
- How competitive is the job market?
- What would you look for in someone's CV or application?
- What advice would you give someone looking for work in this industry?

If you want to find out about the industry or career progression you could ask:

- What are the most important current issues in this sector that are likely to affect your job?
- Are there any particular individuals or organisations that I should be aware of?
- How would you recommend I keep up to date with developments in this field?
- What is the typical career progression in this type of work?
- How has the job changed in the time you've been here?
- How do you see this job developing in the future?
- Are there any drawbacks to working in this sector?

Maintaining your network is essential if you intend on asking questions in the future and can be a gateway for meeting more potential contacts. Follow up your meeting with a short courtesy email to thank them for their time. Include some details from your conversation to remind them of who you are and what you are looking for. Keep them informed of your progress, particularly if it resulted from advice they gave you.

Taking this forward

Use the information you have gained from networking to inform your next steps. You might decide to look for a certain type of work experience to develop a specific skill that's needed, or look for work using a job vacancy site that have been recommended to you.

Networking is also a useful way to access unadvertised job opportunities. Contacting employers directly, to enquire about potential job opportunities, can be particularly effective if you've had some form of networking interaction with them already. For example, you could mention that you became particularly interested in the organisation after speaking to an employee about their role at an event or on Twitter. See the leaflet 'How to find and apply for unadvertised jobs' for further details.

The information you gain can also be used in your answers at application or interview. Having a deeper understanding of the role, company and industry will demonstrate your initiative and commitment to the job.