



Cornwall College

How to build a career network

Networking is the key to building up contacts for your future career so, as **GILL LONGMAN** explains, start now by working out who you can contact to find out more information about your dream job

Networking? It may conjure up images of sad salesmen exchanging business cards and sweaty handshakes, but consciously or not, you've probably been doing it all your life. It's what happens when you get invited to a party of a friend of a friend. And when your mate's girlfriend's cousin is an ace midfielder and agrees to show up for a vital end-of-season match – well, it's not what you know, but who you know that counts isn't it?

Without any effort on your part, you already belong to a number of different social networks. Friends, family, flatmates, tutors, workmates, employers, your careers service... Creating a career network means thinking consciously and creatively about your existing relationships and ways people may be able to help you. And it's about developing new

relationships with people who may be able to offer advice or work experience along the way.

Who do you know?

Take a large sheet of paper and write your name in the middle. Draw lines to groups labelled "friends" (don't forget those at previous schools or colleges), "family", "tutors", "people at work", "team mates", and any other organisation to which you

'It's not what you know, but who you know that counts'

belong. Now start adding names of people you know in each category. The purpose of this exercise is to include as many people as possible. These aren't necessarily the people who will offer you a job – but they may lead you to someone who may lead you to someone who might!

Stage two is to think about these individuals: where do they work? Have they ever talked about something you'd like to know more about? Write your questions or comments alongside the names – don't worry if the sheet is looking messy. This is your working document and you can tidy it up later.

What do you want to do?

At the same time think about what you want to do. You may already have very specific ambitions – or just some vague dreams. If you're at the dreaming stage cast your net wide before you begin to refine your search. Surf the internet and look at websites about the kind of careers or general areas you might be interested in. The internet is a brilliant medium for this kind of activity because one site leads to another like an everlasting electronic Russian doll.

Away from cyberspace, your careers adviser and careers reference sources are obvious leads. Browse leaflets or books about any topic that may appeal. You'll be put off some things but that's OK because it helps narrow your search. And if a topic looks interesting, check for addresses or phone numbers of other sources of information.

Get active

Start with where you are. Heather has just finished her second year studying medicine. She received offers from all the universities she applied to – but there were no doctors among her family or friends. "We did work experience at school but because of patient confidentiality there were no opportunities to work in a hospital or doctor's practice."

Instead, Heather thought laterally and chose to work in a playgroup for disabled children – talking to staff and parents gave her an insight into the realities of living with chronic illness and fuelled her interest in a medical career.

'Most people are pleased to share their experiences'

Soon afterwards Heather started weekend work as a cleaner at her local hospital. Mops and buckets lack the glamour of TV hospital dramas but her job gave Heather valuable insights into the reality of life on the wards.

"I learned so much in those two years: from the dangers of cross-infection to the impact of a patient's social and psychological history on their physical recovery." That first-hand experience was to impress admissions tutors when Heather went for university interviews.

Whether you're at school or university, get to know the careers staff: offer to help at careers talks, act as an ambassador or guide at Open Days. Not only is it good frontline "meeting people" experience, but you'll probably meet the staff who organise events. If they find you reliable they may put your name forward for more prestigious occasions when "the student voice" is required. Not only are you building up your profile for your CV – but your network is growing all the time.



University of Manchester

Your university careers service is also likely to offer expertise in developing your personal portfolio and skills. There may be job shops, volunteering opportunities, work experience and help with finding vacation work. Many university careers departments are also building sophisticated links with former students.

At the same time keep checking your original networking "spider diagram". Talk through your ideas and plans with the people closest to you. If they seem interested or mention a friend or relative who knows something about the subject, don't be afraid to pick up on the lead. You don't need to be pushy – a simple "do you think your uncle would mind talking to me about what he does?" won't upset anyone.

Expert advice

The reality is that most people are flattered and pleased to be considered "an expert" and will gladly share something of their experience. Whether you're emailing, on the telephone or meeting face-to-face always thank people for their

help. You'll have to use your judgement about how the conversation is developing before you ask further favours. However, you're more likely to gain support if you ask for help in incremental stages.

Apart from the personal approach, many big companies offer systematic work experience programmes – and some will even pay you! Company websites are a good starting point and they offer masses of information. If you get the chance to put your foot in the door, seize the moment. Ask questions and observe everything going on around you. How do people behave towards colleagues? Is this the kind of environment that would suit you?

Use your network to help you build the experience that will eventually land you your dream job. Heather Hudson, Careers Counsellor at the University of Brighton sums up the benefits as follows: "Gaining experience whether it's by volunteering, part-time work, in-course placements or through an employer's summer placement scheme means that you will be able to make a more focussed application."