

## **Networking: It's Not Only Who You Know, But What You Do To Get Known**

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## **Introduction**

Employers routinely attempt to minimize the risk inherent in the hiring process by interviewing and hiring personnel that they have met prior to the formal interview. One of the primary ways in which employers meet these potential employees is through the networking process. As a student, networking allows you to meet, interact, and develop relationships with business professionals and faculty who can provide you with advice, guidance, support, referrals, references, and often employment opportunities.

In addition, networking facilitates development and refinement of many of the interpersonal and “soft” skills that you’ll need to interview effectively and achieve success in your business career. For example, networking can assist you in improving your communication skills, which will allow you to explain your interests and accomplishments more effectively to prospective employers and successfully convey information and solutions to future clients and employees. Frequent networking will increase your professional knowledge, poise, appearance, and attitude. Furthermore, you’ll feel more relaxed and self-assured in your professional and personal associations. Finally, networking in organizations may indirectly help you build teamwork skills such as motivating, working with, and leading others.

Unfortunately, when it comes to networking, you may not know where to begin or believe you lack the skills, personality, and opportunities to effectively network. The purpose of this paper is to show you how easily and effectively you can network. Advice will be given on where and how you should begin the networking process, and also what networking opportunities and venues are available to you. Also, some suggestions will be given on what you need to keep in mind as you network.

## **Where and How to Begin**

The first place to begin is with family, friends, neighbors, classmates, and faculty. Inform them of your goals, interests and skills. Specifically, make sure they know what type of job you're looking for (e.g., full-time, part-time, internship, co-op, etc.) and the type of employer and/or area of accounting in which you are interested (e.g., public accounting, industry, not-for-profit, tax, auditing, AIS, etc). Verbal expression and explanation of your career goals with those with whom you are most comfortable should assist you in more clearly identifying and defining exactly what you want to do. Additionally, making them informed will increase the likelihood of them developing a connection for you.

Often your classmates have completed internships or co-ops that may be of interest to you. They will be able to offer you first-hand advice on how they applied for the position, who they contacted, and what their job duties and responsibilities were. Faculty typically have many connections with business professionals and alumni as well. They often hear of job openings before they are posted at the university's career services center, can provide referrals, and are frequently contacted by potential employers for both formal and informal recommendations.

In short, consider everyone as part of your network. Use every reasonable opportunity to network informally, such as parties, family get-togethers, work-outs at the gym, weddings, and other social events. Don't ignore any random connection. You never know from where that potential lead or job offer may come.

Another potential venue for networking you may not have considered is volunteer work. Seriously think about becoming active in service and charitable groups in your community. Not only will you have the satisfaction of helping others in your community, but often you will meet influential members of the community who can assist you in your job search. In addition, such

involvement provides some distinction for you on your resume, as many employers look very favorably during the interview screening process at applicants who have been actively engaged in their community.

Well-known, but often under-utilized settings for students to network are student and professional organizations. Most universities have accounting organizations such as an accounting club, Beta Alpha Psi, National Association of Black Accountants, and student chapters of the Institute of Internal Auditors and the Institute of Management Accountants. There are also business student organizations such as Beta Gamma Sigma and Alpha Kappa Psi. Membership in student organizations not only facilitates your networking with faculty and classmates, but they often provide you with numerous opportunities to interact with alumni and business professionals through presentations, panel discussions, seminars, banquets, and other social functions. Furthermore, don't be a passive member, but instead be an active participant in these organizations. Look for opportunities to become an officer or a leader in these groups. The more time and energy you invest, the more benefits you'll derive from being a member.

In addition, there may be local chapters of professional accounting organizations such as your state CPA society, Institute of Internal Auditors, Institute of Management Accountants, American Association of Women Accountants, Association of Government Accountants, American Association of Hispanic Certified Public Accountants, and National Association of Tax Practitioners, which offer student memberships for free or at a reduced cost (see [www.ipl.org/div/aon/browse/bus03.00.00](http://www.ipl.org/div/aon/browse/bus03.00.00) for a list of professional accounting organizations and links to their websites). Participation in these organizations is a great way to keep abreast with up-to-date information on career paths in accounting and the accounting profession in general. They also provide you with an excellent opportunity to interact with accounting professionals in

your community, and make contacts that are invaluable in the job-seeking process. Most professional organizations are willing and eager to have students attend their chapter meetings, so don't be afraid that you'll be unwelcome.

However, here is a brief word of warning --- don't join numerous student and professional organizations without the intention of actively participating. If for example, you join such organizations simply to "pad" your resume, you'll not only miss out on the benefits of networking, but potential employers will be able to determine your lack of involvement, and it will actually become detrimental to you during the interview process.

Finally, one the best sources to contact for networking events is your university's career services center. Generally, the career services center offers many opportunities for students to network, and the best part is that use of their services and resources is free. One of the primary functions that the career services center periodically sponsors is a career fair. This is an event that is attended by professionals and human resource department representatives from local and national employers. Such an event provides a fantastic opportunity to network in a more relaxed environment, with a large number of companies and firms representing a variety of different industries. This function also provides you an excellent opportunity to ask questions about the company's or firm's internships and permanent positions, career paths, advancement opportunities, products, clients/customers, management structure, and corporate culture and philosophy, to name a few. Finally, it's a great chance to distribute your resume to the company or firm representatives, many of whom are responsible for making the interview and employment decisions.

A couple of other networking opportunities typically provided by the career services center are on- and off-campus information sessions. At these events, senior human resource and

management personnel make presentations about their products, services, training, management structure, recruiting process, career development, career paths, and any immediate career opportunities. The sessions generally conclude with ample time for questions and answers. At an off-campus information session, a company frequently gives a site tour of its facilities and often provides lunch for the attendees. Both types of sessions present you with an opportunity to meet and network with recent hires and lower-level management personnel from departments where you, as a new hire, would be working. Many students who have participated in these sessions have subsequently been offered interviews for permanent and internship positions.

One information session that you should make every effort to attend is the information/social event held on campus the night prior to your campus interview. Here, many of your general questions will be answered, and you will be able to meet the recruiters that will be interviewing you the next day. Make sure you pay close attention to the information provided, because this will offer you a great opportunity to formulate follow-up questions to ask during your interview.

Many career services centers are increasing their non-structured networking opportunities, especially with respect to alumni involvement. For example, many have developed on-line alumni networking databases, which allow you to search for alumni contact information. The listed alumni are available to assist you in your career and job searching process, and many of them have volunteered to serve as mentors to individual students. Generally, students who use this service contact alumni in companies or career fields in which they have a particular interest. Often they arrange “informational interviews” with individual alumnus, which allow them to obtain advice and ask specific questions about the alumnus’ company, career, experience, skills, education, etc. Informational interviews are low-stress

discussions that can be conducted over the phone, during lunch, or at the office of the alumnus. Besides making a personal contact within the company and having your questions answered, other benefits you can derive from informational interviews are identifying your professional strengths and weaknesses, gaining confidence and experience for formal job interviews, and finding out about internal job postings at the alumnus' business.

Finally, the career services center typically offers many resources to facilitate your networking experience. For example, networking workshops and seminars are generally conducted. Their objective is to give you advice on how to prepare for and participate in networking events in general, and career fairs in particular. Many career services centers also sponsor seminars on dining etiquette. Several networking functions involve receptions, lunches, or dinners, so it's important for you to know the "dos" and the "don'ts" when it comes to dining etiquette. These seminars, which are usually coordinated by a certified business etiquette professional, give advice and hands-on experience on proper table manners and dining skills. In addition, business professionals and alumni are frequently invited, so the event provides another opportunity for you to network.

Given all the services and resources available from the career services center, you may wonder how you keep apprised of everything available. First, it's strongly recommended that you visit their office at the beginning of each semester to obtain a schedule of workshops, seminars, and networking events that will be held during the semester. Additionally, the career services center typically has alternative sources to keep you informed, such as newsletters, email, and a website.

## **What to Do (and Not Do)**

The key to networking, like most things in life, is preparation. First, find out the location and time of the networking event, what companies/firms are attending the event, and if possible, the names of the people you are going to meet and how to pronounce their names. If it is an event sponsored by the career services center, much of this information is likely to be posted on their website. For off-campus events, make sure you have directions and know how to get there. If you're going to a career fair, identify in advance the companies/firms you wish to target.

Second, make sure you spend some time researching the companies/firms in attendance, and think about what questions you would like to ask as well as any advice you'd like to receive. If you have done your homework prior to the networking event, you'll prepare more relevant and intelligent questions, and will be better able to respond to questions asked of you. Also, you'll be more relaxed and confident, and will more likely make a favorable impression on the people you meet because you'll appear more professional, organized, and mature. Therefore, know something about the philosophy, culture, and mission statement of the company. You should also know what are its primary services, products, locations, customers, and competitors. You don't need to research the company as thoroughly as you would if you were going to a formal interview; however, you do want to expend some reasonable time and effort in researching the companies that will attend the event. In addition, if job prospects subsequently progress with a company or firm you met at the networking event, you already have a good head-start in any future research that you would need to conduct. Great ways to begin your research include reviewing the company's annual report and its website. For example, many companies have an "About Us" page on their website which provides useful summary information. Also, the career services center and library staff may be able to direct you to other helpful sources of information.



Next, make sure you have an up-to-date resume. Proofread it and bring plenty of copies printed on professional resume paper. Depending on the type of networking event, you may want to bring copies with you (e.g., for career fairs, informational interviews, and information sessions) or leave them in your car (e.g., for volunteer work, student and professional organization meetings, social and family events, and etiquette dinners). Always be aware of the possibility of giving or sending a copy of your resume to someone with whom you spoke. Also, never be without a couple of pens and a pad of paper so you can quickly and easily write down any information you receive and impressions you have of the company and people you meet.

An additional area of preparation you want to consider is your appearance. Prior to the event, always inquire about the dress code. If it hasn't been explicitly communicated to you, usually the best source to check with is the career services center. At many sponsored networking events, the dress code will be business professional. Wear a dark, neutral colored suit; dark, comfortable dress shoes; simple jewelry; and be sure to sparingly use any colognes, perfumes and/or cosmetics. Make sure your suit is cleaned and pressed, your shoes polished, and your overall appearance is well-groomed, which includes having a neat and professional hairstyle. Also, you'll want to bring a comb, tissues, and breath mints for those unforeseen emergencies. Your overall appearance does influence the other person's first impression, and in networking, first impressions do make a significant difference.

A final consideration in your preparation is to take some time to think about and prepare how you will introduce and present yourself to others. Be prepared to include in your verbal introduction information about your background, skills, and the type of job or field in which you have an interest. Also, you should be able to expand upon your introduction by succinctly and intelligently describing your strengths and accomplishments, as well as areas you seek to

improve. Furthermore, in order to conduct a professional conversation, make sure you are aware of major current events, especially those related to business, accounting, and student-interest news. Regular reading and scanning of relevant newspapers and periodicals, many of which are available on-line, should assist you in this area.

On the day of the networking event, make sure you arrive as early as possible. Give yourself an extra few minutes to get to the location of the event. Once you've arrived, put on a name badge so people will know your name, and begin networking as soon as possible. Don't jump from person to person, but give yourself some time to have an extensive and pleasant conversation with each person you meet. At the same time, it's usually unwise to spend the entire event talking to just one person or group of people. As you gain more experience and become more confident in your networking abilities, try not to network in a group, but instead do it alone. This will force you to have a conversation with the people you meet, and increase the likelihood that they will remember you. If you're having trouble getting started, have a friend or professor introduce you to someone you'd like to meet. This will eliminate much of the awkwardness of starting a conversation. If it's a non-college event and there is no one around to introduce you, look for alumni from your school. You already have something in common with them, and generally, they'll be happy to introduce you to other people. Never interrupt someone else when they are talking. Wait patiently and listen to what they are discussing. Listening attentively will give you a better opportunity to enter the discussion when the time is appropriate. Watch what you eat. Some foods tend to be messier or are easily spilled. Also, be careful how you act; outbursts or unnatural gestures may be misinterpreted or perceived as unprofessional. Remember that you're trying to make a good first impression.

When you're being introduced to another person, stand straight, smile, shake their hand firmly and at all times maintain eye contact whether talking or listening. Make sure you maintain a professional attitude. Be outgoing, friendly, and courteous. You want to appear enthusiastic and assertive, so speak clearly and confidently. Look alert and interested at all times. This will let the other person know that you value their time and advice. Don't be over-aggressive, over-confident or too familiar with the person with whom you are speaking. Often there is a fine line between what's proper and improper behavior when carrying on a conversation. Be careful to use appropriate language and avoid speaking negatively about other people and past experiences. Many people tend to ramble when they get nervous or are unsure what to say. So try to relax and carefully consider what you are about to say.

When beginning a conversation with an unfamiliar person, start slowly. Ask them simple questions such as where they work (if it's not obvious), what they do, and what they like about their job. Then as the conversation progresses, begin asking some of the questions you formulated during your research. Try to make as many personal connections as possible. Attempt to identify items that you have in common or areas of shared interest. This makes it more likely that the person you are talking with will remember you and leaves the impression that you would be someone with whom they would enjoy working.

One of the most important things you can do when conversing with someone is to listen carefully and focus on what they are saying. Let the person know you've heard and value what they have said by asking follow-up questions based on the conversation. If the other person is asking a question, let them finish their question before you respond. Don't interrupt them or try to anticipate the question. If possible, elaborate on your answer. Avoid simple yes or no answers. If you don't understand the question or need a couple of seconds to formulate your

answer, let the other person know. They would rather re-phrase their question or give you some time to think about your answer than have you answer with an irrelevant or unresponsive comment.

Above all, when talking to people you meet at networking events, be honest and sincere. Don't fabricate stories or misrepresent yourself. Many of the people with whom you are conversing will quickly recognize if you are being untruthful and disingenuous. Ethical behavior is an essential characteristic employers are seeking in potential employees. Therefore, make sure you conduct yourself with integrity and high moral character throughout the entire networking process.

Attempt to end each conversation on a positive note. This leaves a more favorable and lasting impression on those with whom you had spoken. Ask each contact for his/her business card. By obtaining business cards, it will be easier for you to remember the name, company, and position of each person that you met. Also, save the business cards for future reference; they will serve as a convenient reference when you follow-up with the contacts that you met. Finally, before you leave the event, try to say goodbye to everyone with whom you had conversed. Not only is this practice common courtesy, but it will increase the likelihood that people will remember you, which again is one of the primary objectives of networking.

After the event is over and you get home, take some time to organize any notes you've taken and include any items that you've subsequently considered. Examples include: What did you learn from the people with whom you talked? How did the event impact your career goals? Are there any follow-up actions you need to take, such as sending a resume or scheduling an interview? Include your impressions of the event and the people you met. Assess your

performance. What did you do well? What did you do poorly? How would you do it differently? Keep an organized file or spreadsheet of your network contacts and events.

Most importantly, within a couple of days after the event, follow-up with thank you letters or emails to the people you met. Indicate where and when you met them, and try to include some of the points you discussed. Inform them that you enjoyed the conversation, and that you valued their time and advice. If they had any questions that you left unanswered, your follow-up letter presents a good opportunity to answer them. Ask them to notify you if they come across any other information that may be useful to you. Let them know that you are looking forward to seeing them at future events, and conclude the letter with your desire to remain in contact. Make sure that somewhere in the letter or email you include your contact information (e.g., mailing address, phone number and email address), and double-check to make sure they are accurate. Before mailing the letter or sending the email, make sure it is free of both grammatical and spelling mistakes. Your written correspondence with the contact presents them an opportunity to evaluate both your communication skills and your professionalism.

Finally, now that you've gone through the effort of making a valuable contact, be sure you periodically contact them and keep them informed of your progress. Be careful not to be a nuisance, but don't hesitate to drop them an email every few months, especially if you expect to see them at other events in the future. The last thing you want to have happen in networking is for the people you meet to forget you.

### **Conclusion**

In today's economy, employers are frequently laying off employees and many are decreasing their projected hiring needs. Furthermore, when a job does open, many employers never even advertise or publicly announce the position, but instead prefer to hire an established

contact or someone who has been referred to them. As a result, accounting students are facing challenging and frustrating times when searching for a job.

The good news is that early and effective networking can significantly increase your chances of finding the job for which you are looking. Employers are still quite active in their presence on campus, particularly in their involvement with student organizations and the career services center. Students who actively participate in on- and off-campus networking activities gain tremendous exposure to prospective employers, and are more likely to land a job interview than by sending an unsolicited resume. Therefore, take advantage of all opportunities to meet business professionals and alumni, and continually work on developing relationships.

Make sure you communicate to others your job search strategies and career goals. Set realistic networking goals, such as obtaining a mentor, participating in community service, attending a minimum number of campus-sponsored networking events, meeting a certain number of new contacts at each event, conducting an informational interview, and developing a schedule for staying in touch with contacts. Don't be concerned if you're not a natural when it comes to networking. For most people, it takes practice, just like any other skill. However, developing and mastering good networking skills is worth your time and effort, since it's a skill you'll rely upon your entire professional career.