

Networking & Informational Interviews

Talking to people is the most effective way to learn about specific industries and organizations and find opportunities. Networking is about building connections and learning from the insight and experience of others.

It is unlikely that any one person will connect you to the perfect opportunity, but each person you meet will probably give you ideas, advice, and insight that will lead you to your next contact. If you are gracious and proactive, the relationships you build over time will help you land referrals and opportunities.

Uncomfortable “using” people or asking them to find you a job? Great, because that is not what networking is. You don’t have to be extroverted, rich, or have parents with friends in high places. And it doesn’t have to be scary. It is a lifelong process of involving people in your life and work. If you are truly interested in learning from others and show them respect, they probably will want to offer you support. In turn, be sure to express your appreciation, use good follow-up skills to nurture the relationship, return the favor when you can, and pay it forward when others ask for help.

WHY NETWORKING IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO SPEND YOUR TIME

Ask around and you’ll find that most people have landed a job through networking. Making connections, especially in combination with other search strategies, is significantly more successful than merely applying to positions. For one thing, it’s easier and more appealing for organizations to interview candidates that current employees know. Secondly, many positions are filled before they ever get posted to the public. Smart networking will ensure that you know about the “hidden job market” of un-posted positions that may open up or are being created. Networking can make the difference between being selected for an interview and being left out.

EXPLORATION & PREPARATION

Before you start networking, you’ll need to educate yourself. This starts with searching the internet, reading industry guides on Vault, and sifting through CAREERlink. Check out position descriptions and get an idea of the major players in your industry. Utilize our Search Strategies handout, meet with a career advisor, and develop a list of target organizations. Take a look at profiles on LinkedIn and take note of the internships and jobs that led to their current position.

Find your community & become a super fan

Identify media, blogs, and social media that are important to people working in the industries that appeal to you. Follow them and regularly read stories (or at least headlines!). For example, someone interested in advertising will learn a ton from following Advertising Age, and future venture capitalists should read the Wall Street Journal. Reading the same things as industry professionals will help you build your vocabulary and ability to make smart conversation. It will show employers that you are a student of the industry- something that will set you apart from others. It may also alert you to possible contacts.

CONNECTING

The good news is that you're already connected. Brainstorm a list of people in your world, beginning with your family, friends, WashU faculty and staff. Think about friends of parents, parents of friends, current and past supervisors, coaches, religious leaders, and doctors. These people might not do exactly what you want to do, but they might know someone who does. Reach out and ask. You can expand your contacts by identifying and reaching out to new people. Social media has made this easier than ever, but don't underestimate the power of meeting face-to-face.

Get involved and be social

- Be an active member of campus and community life. Serve on committees and volunteer.
- Ask for advice from respected acquaintances, co-workers, and supervisors.

Find WashU alumni

- Search the Success Stories database on the Career Center website and reach out to fellow students with internships that interest you.
- Join one of our Career Interest Groups. Members are alerted to skill-building resources, speakers, industry-targeted advice, and opportunities for networking. Join on the Career Center web site.
- Join the Washington University Alumni group in LinkedIn. It has nearly 25,000 members and will increase your odds of finding a relevant connection when you do an advanced search.
- Join a regional young alumni group offered through WashU Alumni & Development to network at social events with others in a specific city.

Engage in professional communities

- Attend meetings and conferences for professional associations. As a student, you can often join professional organizations at a reduced rate.
- Reach out to those whose work has impressed you. Stick around after presentations to compliment the speaker and introduce yourself.
- Follow thought leaders on social media and comment or re-tweet.
- Attend Career Center programs and information sessions. We often invite professionals to campus. Introduce yourself and ask questions to form a personal connection.

STUDENT SUCCESS STORIES

Alana

Alana wanted to work for a nonprofit in Washington, D.C. where she could use her Spanish-speaking skills and leverage her major in English literature. Before a visit to the city, she contacted organizations on her target list to set up informational interviews. While in D.C., she met with her contacts to learn more about their careers, the organizations they worked for, and their insights about the local community. As she researched, Alana noticed that someone from her high school worked at an organization on her target list -- the Folger Shakespeare Library. She contacted him on LinkedIn, and while she was in D.C., they had a friendly reunion and productive conversation. The friend passed Alana's resume along for an unadvertised position at the organization. Thanks to her networking savvy, Alana is now working as a diversity coordinator, developing a communications plan for Hispanic audiences.

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

Some networking happens in the moment- when you strike up a conversation while waiting in line, or meet someone at a reception. Some people are great at those kinds of spontaneous interactions. Others find that intimidating and prefer to have time to prepare in advance. Informational interviewing is an intentional form of networking where you plan a time to ask a person about their work. You have more control over your preparation and can ask specifics, based on your research and curiosity.

How to introduce yourself

Help others help you by making a poised first impression. Give context for why you are reaching out and be as specific as possible about what you're looking for. Most professionals are happy to help someone who is gracious, respectful, and prepared. You may have heard of a 30 second commercial or elevator pitch. No matter what you call it, it boils down to a concise, smooth introduction that includes:

- Who you are and how you got their name
- Why you are approaching him/her
- What you hope will happen

Sending an email:

Professionals receive TONS of email every day. Strike a balance between providing enough information and being as concise as possible. You'll kill someone's enthusiasm to help you if you weigh down their inbox with wordy emails or tons of back-and-forth. You should also strive to make the logistics as easy as possible.

- If you are asking to meet for coffee, look up coffee shops near their office and suggest one (you should also treat!).
- Provide some time/day suggestions.
- Lean towards being formal rather than too casual- use proper salutations, complete sentences, and correct grammar.
- Gracefully mention how you plan to follow up on your initial contact.
- Send a confirmation email the day before to make sure the date, time, and location still work.
- Send a calendar invite including the location address and your mobile number.

Here's an example email:

Good afternoon,

I am a rising senior at Washington University in St. Louis, majoring in math. My advisor, April Shinell, mentioned you and suggested that you may be open to talking to me about your experience in finance.

I'm interning this summer at the New York office of ABC Financial, and I'd appreciate the chance to meet with you for 15-20 minutes sometime this month. I'll be starting my full-time job search this fall and I'd love to hear about your career path and your current work at XYZ. I noticed that there is a Starbucks in the lobby of your building and thought that might be a convenient meeting place. I am typically available Wednesdays after 3:00 pm or Friday mornings. However, please let me know if there is a date or time that works best for you.

I know you have a very busy schedule, so thanks for considering. If I don't hear from you by next week, I'll plan to follow-up. I'm excited to connect and compare notes from WashU.

Thank you,

Ravi Patel

Introducing yourself in person:

You'll want to sound polished – but also natural and conversational. Practice ahead of time to feel confident when you do it for real. Here's an example of a face-to-face introduction after a Career Center panel:

"Hi, my name is Kim Lee and I'm an anthropology major. I'm interested in public relations, and I loved hearing about your work! I enjoy writing, and I currently manage social media for X student group. Would it be okay if I connect with you on LinkedIn and reach out to set up a time when I could ask you a few questions? I'm starting to look for a summer internship, and would appreciate your advice about pulling together writing samples and expanding my target list."

Connecting through LinkedIn:

Maximize your chances of someone accepting your invitation to connect by customizing the personal note field. State who you are, why you want to connect, mention any mutual acquaintances, or point out something you have in common. You have a limited number of characters so make them count.

"Hello- I'm a member of the Government & Public Policy group at the WashU Career Center. I understand that you were involved when you were a student. Are you open to connecting so I can ask your advice about exploring NGOs in D.C.?"

- Amy Craig"

Following up with a phone call:

Professionals are very busy so don't despair if you don't get a response to your outreach. After a week or so, a follow-up phone call is a good way to touch base. Phone contact is rare, and therefore might stand out. You may get voicemail, but be prepared for a conversation just in case. If you do get voicemail, speak slowly and clearly and repeat your name and phone number before you hang up.

"Hello Ms. Cochran. My name is Ravi Patel, and I am a student at Washington University. I sent you an email a week ago about possibly setting up a time to talk about your work in finance. I know you must be very busy, so I thought I'd try to catch you by phone... (proceed to mention possible dates and your contact info.)"

STUDENT SUCCESS STORIES**Madeline**

Madeline's post-graduation goal was to be an interaction designer at a tech start-up or design-thinking studio in the bay area. She regularly followed industry blogs and social media. She made a target list and cross-checked LinkedIn contacts to identify alum or other contacts. Working with her advisor, Madeline reached out to a number of people and set up coffee dates over spring break, toting her portfolio and resume. Afterwards, she wrote handwritten thank you notes and regularly touched base with the most promising of the group. After applying for a job opening at a start-up, Madeline was invited to visit the studio for a daylong series of meetings and a tour. Thanks to the information Madeline had gained from her contacts, she was prepared going in. A few days later, she received a formal offer.

PREPARING FOR YOUR DISCUSSION

Research and planning will help you make the most of your informational interview. You'll want to develop insightful questions that help you determine fit and that also impress your contact. Spend time learning about the industry and organization where your contact works. Learn about how current events have affected the industry. Look at your contact's LinkedIn profile and social media accounts. Then, come up with a list of open-ended questions.

Here are some example questions that you'll want to ask and build on:

- What are some things you do on a daily basis?
- What do you like most about your work?
- What is most challenging about your job?
- How did you start out? How did you get to your current position?
- What kinds of entry-level positions should I look for? How do people advance?
- What will make me a strong candidate?
- What advice do you have for someone who is just starting out?
- What is something about your work that you didn't anticipate before you started?
- What blogs, articles, thought-leaders or organizations should I follow?
- Can you suggest other people I can contact to continue my research?

CONDUCTING YOUR INTERVIEW

Arrive 10 minutes early. Dress professionally- always a notch nicer than seems necessary- to indicate motivation and respect. Bring copies of your resume and your list of questions in a portfolio folder.

Your discussion will likely be conversational, with you asking intermittent questions. Bring paper to take notes. If it feels appropriate, go ahead and ask for advice on your resume, or for ideas about where to look for an internship or job. Keep an eye on the time, and begin wrapping up after 15-20 minutes. Always end with a "thank you," ask for a business card and if it's okay to connect on LinkedIn to stay in contact.

STUDENT SUCCESS STORIES

Kyle

Kyle applied for a job at Bloomingdale's that he first learned about on CAREERlink. He was not granted an interview, but he attended the on-campus information session anyway. After the session, he introduced himself to the recruiter. They had a short but effective conversation, and he soon received an offer to interview. After a successful interview, he was selected for a second-round interview in New York.

EXPRESSING GRATITUDE & KEEPING IN TOUCH

Networking is not a one-time event. It is about relationship building and reciprocity. Send a thank you note ASAP to express appreciation for the time and insight shared. Make your note concise and specific, and be sure to give updates about advice you followed or next steps you've taken as a result of your conversation.

In the weeks and months after your meeting, let your contacts know about your progress. Pass along information they might find interesting or helpful. It's smart to track your contacts in a spreadsheet (or something similar) to keep tabs on when you last spoke. Emails should be conversational, but also concise and professional.

Here are some ideas for staying in contact:

- Share links to relevant articles
- Send LinkedIn notes to congratulate them on job transitions
- Ask for advice on a project or paper
- Comment on their social media posts
- Volunteer to share a job listing from their company with students on campus
- Send greetings for birthdays, holidays, or special occasions
- Make plans to grab coffee when you're in the area
- Update them on your search or ask about progress on one of their projects

When you land a job or internship, let contacts know where you end up working. Thank them for the role they played in helping you get there. Continue keeping in touch; you never know when your paths might cross again.

PAY IT FORWARD

Someday (sooner than you think – maybe even when you're still a student) you will be in a position to share your story and advice with others. When that day comes, remember that taking time out of your schedule to give of yourself may be the best way to keep the karmic power of networking on your side.