

Your personal network is an important tool that you should develop and maintain throughout your career. Here we explain what a network is and how make the most of your network throughout your career.

1) *What is a Network?*

Put simply, a network is “an interconnected system of things or people.”¹ Networks can help you find your next job, gain insights about an industry, and provide additional opportunities for socializing.

Networking can occur at any time and anywhere: at home, school, work, career events, and even social gatherings. You should treat every new situation or event as an opportunity to expand your network. You never know who you might meet! And don't forget that networks work both ways. Returning the favor, if asked, is part of every good network.

Your network is not just a one-time thing to help you land a job; it is a lifetime tool that you should continually develop throughout your career.

2) *Creating your Network*

List everyone you know who might be interested in your career/educational goals. This includes friends, family, professors, past and present employers, co-workers, and contacts from social networking sites such as Facebook or LinkedIn. Your network is a lot bigger than you think!

Create a contact list in whichever format you prefer, such as in your phone, in Microsoft Outlook, or in a simple Excel spreadsheet. Update your contact list with the name and contact information of the people you meet, along with any other relevant information such as conversations you have and any particular connections with that person.

Free Online Networking Tool: Jibber Jobber (www.jibberjobber.com) is a really cool networking and career management tool that allows you to track and manage your contacts, relationships, and job search efforts.

3) *Expanding your Network*

You should actively look for opportunities to expand your network. New contacts can arise from:

- Searching the alumni database and requesting informational interviews²
- Talking to classmates and professors about companies you're interested in
- Attending company-sponsored events
- Joining local professional or networking organizations such as The Triangle Business Professional Guild

4) *Using your Network*

The purpose of your network may change at different points in your career, but the central means of using it will always remain the same.

1. **Clearly communicate your specific goals or objectives.** Be able to succinctly explain what information or contacts you need. This can be a simple statement explaining that you are looking to learn more about a particular company or industry.
2. **Let people know what they can do to help you.** Sometimes the help you need may seem obvious to you, but not to others in your network. By clearly identifying how an individual can assist you, you make it easier for them and increase the likelihood that you'll receive the help you want.
3. **Be prepared to give as much assistance as you are given.** To get the most out of your network, you must be willing to reciprocate anything that is done for you. The more you do for those in your network, the more they will be willing to do for you and the stronger your network will become.

5) *Maintaining your Network*

In order for a network to be useful, you need to maintain it. This includes staying abreast of contact changes (job titles, career moves, email addresses, phone numbers, etc.), continually seeking out new contacts, and staying in touch with existing ones. It is also important to periodically reach out to people in your network to let them know what you're up to.

Determining how best to maintain various relationships can be challenging. Depending on the type and length of the relationship, some contacts require only an occasional short note, while others may need more time and attention. Some ideas for keeping in touch with members of your network:

- Touch base with an email to share an article you read, or other information that you know might be interesting or important to that person
- Send an annual holiday card
- Make a note on your calendar to call or email them on their birthday
- Schedule a monthly or bi-monthly coffee or lunch date

A network is only as useful as the contacts and information in it, so remember to take the time to maintain and fully utilize the network that you have built for yourself.

¹ Definition from www.thefreedictionary.com

² "An informational interview involves talking with people who are currently working in the field to gain a better understanding of an occupation or industry -- and to build a network of contacts in that field." (www.quintcareers.com)

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