

## Build a Professional Learning Network

When we think of networking we often think of collecting and passing out business cards in a room full of people that we don't know. Few of us are genuinely enthused by this scenario. Networking is extremely important, but it doesn't have to be quite as intimidating as we often make it out to be.

So, instead of thinking about networking in terms of business suits and handshakes, let's change the paradigm a bit. Before you even think about making contacts and talking to people, you need to figure out what you want to say. Start by thinking about your answers to some key questions:

### 1. What are my immediate and long-term professional goals?

Some examples:

- Figure out how I want to use my MPH in Communications and Marketing
- Work for a federal government agency
- Lead clinical trials

### 2. What do I need to know in order to achieve my goals?

Some examples:

- What organizations have communications and marketing positions? What type of organization would I most like to work for?
- What is the best way to obtain a federal position? What are the fellowship programs and contracting companies that might make it easier for me to transition into a government job?
- What types of entry-level positions would best prepare me for a future career leading clinical trials? Is there any additional education or training I need in order to be qualified to lead a clinical trial?

When we view networking as a means to obtaining information – rather than asking for a job – it immediately becomes less intimidating. As you gain more information, you can refine your goals and your questions so that they become more specific.

Now that you know what you need to know, ask yourself a third question:

### 3. Who can I speak with to gain the information I need?

Here's where the idea of a professional learning network comes in. Picture it like this:



The traditional conception of networking starts with new contacts, but chances are that you have helpful people already surrounding you.

### **People You Know**

People you know include professors, advisors, current and past supervisors and co-workers, classmates, relatives, friends, etc. Oftentimes we have great mentors available to us, but we aren't sure exactly how to utilize them. Brainstorming your answers to the questions above will give you a specific purpose for contacting mentors. Here are some things to keep in mind when contacting people within this first level of your professional learning network:

- Take advantage of faculty office hours/set up appointments
- Have an objective, know what you want to learn
- Respect time and privacy
- Ask for referrals or introductions to additional contacts
- Express appreciation, send thank you notes

As you speak with people, always ask **“Who else should I talk to?”** This is the best way to expand your network to the next level – the people who know people you know.

### **People Who Know People You Know**

This group could include colleagues and friends of your friends, former co-workers or family members. You might also look to your fraternity/sorority, religious organization, or volunteer organizations to expand your network. And don't underestimate the power of your alumni network(s). You can also utilize LinkedIn to find second degree connections that you would be interested in meeting; see our “When, Why, and How to Use LinkedIn” handout to learn how to identify people of interest. You can also use our “Informational Interviews” handout to learn more about how to conduct a successful meeting with a new contact. Here are some things to keep in mind when contacting the people who know people you know:

- Do your homework first, know who the person is and what information you're seeking
- Focus on seeking expertise - in some cases it may not be proper to ask for job leads
- Ask for referrals or introductions to additional contacts
- Express appreciation, send thank you notes

### **New Contacts**

In addition to traditional networking events such as career fairs and happy hours, other great ways to meet new people in your field include lectures, conferences, and seminars. When attending these types of events, be sure to talk to the people around you. You can use our “Tell Me About Yourself” handout to learn about the best way to present yourself to someone new. Here are some things to keep in mind when making new contacts:

- Ask questions that go beyond what someone does, ask about current projects, interests, goals
- Focus on building relationships – what can you offer to the people you're meeting?

- Follow up by sending a thank you note or passing on useful information

### **Virtual Mentors**

In today's connected world, it's easy to find all of the information we need (or *think* we may need) while sitting in front of a computer screen. However, when looking for career information, is it almost always best to seek out real people; they can often offer you even more than what you ask in terms of information and advice. That being said, there is a place for virtual mentors within your professional learning network. Here are some ways you can utilize online sources of information in your career development:

- Engage with experts in your field by reading publications, following blogs, commenting on discussion boards or watching/participating in webinars
- Utilize LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms to learn about company culture, news, and announcements (including job announcements)
- Create positive content – writing a blog or contributing to online discussions or publications positions you as someone who is active in the field

Remember, networking is really about building relationships. If you invest the time to build a professional learning network now, you're more likely to have knowledge and contacts you can rely on when it comes time to apply for a job.