Networking and Informational Interviews

What is Networking and Why is it Important?
Networking is simply making connections and building relationships with others. The most effective networking involves making meaningful connections and staying in regular contact. Networking is a lifelong process that takes time and continual development to bring results.

Networking is an essential component of every job search. Throughout your life, your networking contacts may include friends, colleagues, and professional prospects. If you inform all your contacts you are looking for a job, they can help you find one faster.

How Do I Start?

Be Yourself
98% is completely natural to feel nervous talking with professionals you have never met. Have confidence in the communication skills you have gained in the classroom and from additional life experiences and remember that most people enjoy helping college students. Consider networking an opportunity to gain even more communication skills, learn about your field of interest, and meet new professionals. Be respectful and remember that you have much to learn from each person you meet.

The Art of Small Talk
Most networking begins through casual everyday conversation. Strike up a conversation with the people you meet in your normal routine; you never know who may have an aunt, brother, or friend in your field. Small talk is an art that anyone can perfect:
- Be aware of current events and hot topics in your field
- Look for people standing alone or eager for conversation
- Think about how you want to introduce yourself and start the conversation before approaching someone
- Listen well and ask meaningful questions
- Be confident, concise, and respectful
- Ask open-ended questions

Connecting with Others
- Professional or trade association meetings
- Campus events, alumni, and professors
- Parents, friends, neighbors, supervisors, previous employers, and classmates
- Community volunteer organizations
- Social groups and belief/faith-based groups
- Sporting, music, or recreation events

The First Impression: How to Structure a Networking Conversation
- Introduce yourself and establish rapport
  Easy conversation starters: the weather, food (if at the event), a compliment (genuine)
- Ask questions to learn about the person you are meeting (see last page for examples)
- Create a connection between the two of you (“It sounds like we have a lot of the same ideas about our field of interest,” etc.)
- Suggest a future meeting
- Wrap-up the conversation and offer your assistance to the person you have just met
- Obtain their business card and write down notes on the back to remember facts and key details
Example
Hi, my name is ____ and I’m a current student at UWRF. Other person introduces themselves. I’m here to learn more about _____. What brings you here? Other person responds. How did you get started in your career path? Other person responds. That’s interesting that you went to UWRF as well and that we have similar career interests. I’d be really interested in learning more about what you do. Would you mind if I contact you in the future to ask a few additional questions or conduct an informational interview? Exchange of business cards. It was so nice meeting you. Please let me know if I can ever be of assistance to you in any way.

The Importance of Follow-Up
The number one rule of networking is to stay in touch!
- Write a brief thank you note to those you meet
- Send an invitation to connect via LinkedIn
- Mention that you will update each person periodically
- Follow up when you say you will. Opportunities for follow-up include:
  - Sending a revised resume and politely asking for their opinion
  - Sending an article or artifact that reflects their interests
- Keep track of your correspondence with each person in your network including dates and details of messages and telephone conversations, questions and answers from informational interviews, notes from office visits, dates you have agreed to follow-up, etc.

Networking Dos and Don’ts
Do
- Keep in touch with the individuals you meet
- Develop lasting relationships, not just contacts
- Use networking skills in both your personal and professional life
- Keep learning and developing networking skills
- Always look for ways to help the people in your network
- Be prepared to engage in networking conversations
- Be open and inquisitive about the information your network partners share with you
- Spread out informational interviews and networking events so you have enough time to adequately prepare
- Connect on LinkedIn

Don’t
- Brag or exaggerate the truth in your conversations
- Spend too much time in unfocused conversation; you should appreciate your partner’s time
- Try to develop network connections with everyone you meet
- Forget to thank your network partners and keep in touch with them
- Gossip or share inappropriately with network partners; stay professional and relevant
- Allow your networking relationship to become one-sided
- Ask personal questions or questions about money
- Even think about asking for a job; keep the focus on gathering information and advice

How is Networking Different from Informational Interviewing?
Informational interviewing can be part of the networking process. In an informational interview, you have the opportunity to explore your field of interest through a structured conversation with someone already working in that field.
What is an Informational Interview?
An informational interview is an interview that you initiate - you ask the questions. The purpose is to obtain information, not to get a job. You may be researching a career, researching a company, or attempting to network with someone in a particular field. Reasons to conduct an informational interview may include:

- Networking, which can lead to potential jobs/internships
- Gaining experience and self-confidence when interviewing
- Learning about a particular organization, field, or career
- Asking for other referrals: “Who else do you know that may be helpful to me in my search?”

What Steps to Take?

1. **Identify who you want to talk to**
   Contrary to what you may think, top level managers are not necessarily the best sources of information to contact early in your process. Individuals who hold positions similar to the ones you plan to seek are your best contacts when you begin to conduct informational interviews.

   Begin by assessing your own personal network of family, friends, and co-workers. Ask each person you know for possible contacts in your field(s) of choice. A personal referral is the ideal referral, but cold calls to individuals you may have read or heard about can also be effective.

   Access the UWRF Mentor Network or alumni features in LinkedIn to locate friends and alumni who are willing to conduct informational interviews and assist you in your research.

2. **Set up the interview**
   What to say when calling or emailing to set up the interview:
   - Briefly introduce yourself
   - Explain why you are writing or calling and how you found them (referral, LinkedIn, etc.)
   - Briefly state your interests or experiences in the person’s profession or career
   - Explain why you would like to meet with them; tell them you are looking for information and advice to learn more about their career and/or company
   - Then ask for a date to schedule the informational interview

3. **Treat the informational interview as a professional point of contact**
   Dress professionally and arrive early. Send a thank you note and LinkedIn connection request as soon as possible after the interview.

4. **Prepare**
   Have your informational interview questions prepared ahead of time (see next page for examples). Perform extensive research on the company/organization for which the interviewee works.

**Reminder:** The informational interview is not a time for you to ask for a job.

**However:** Many people are offered internships or possible positions as a result of making this contact.

Conducting an Informational Interview
Again, do your research. Read information on the occupation and company so you can ask meaningful questions. Develop a list of questions prior to the interview; remain flexible though and respond to the information presented, which may end up being more valuable than the answers to the questions you prepared. Remember to consider your own values and preferences in preparing these questions. Your objective is to see if this occupation would be the type of career you would enjoy or if the organization would provide what you are looking for in a company or job. You should also be ready to talk about yourself and your interests, academic strengths, and career goals. The following questions are some you may consider asking:
The Position/Career Path

- What is your position/title? What are your responsibilities? What does a typical work day look like for you?
- Why does this field of work interest you, and how did you get started? Is your career path typical?
- What training, education, personal qualities, abilities, skills, and special requirements are needed for this type of work? Are there certain types of employees who are more successful than others?
- What part of this job do you find most satisfying? Most challenging?
- How did your college experience prepare you for this job?
- What kinds of experience (paid or unpaid) would you recommend for someone wanting to enter this field? What entry-level jobs are best for learning as much as possible?
- What are some pressures, problems, and challenges for a person entering this career?
- What is the demand for people in this occupation?
- How has your work changed recently due to technology, marketplace, or competition? How do you predict the field will change in the future?
- If you could do things all over again, would you choose the same path for yourself? Why or why not? What would you change?

The Company/Industry

- What is the average length of time for an employee to stay in the job you hold? Are there incentives or disincentives for staying in the same job?
- Is there flexibility related to dress, work hours, vacation schedule, etc.?
- How does (current employer) compare to other places you’ve worked? How would you describe the company culture?
- What does the company do to contribute to the employees’ overall professional development? What types of training does the company offer newly hired individuals entering this field?

Next Step Questions

- Can you suggest some publications I might read? What professional associations are common in this field?
- Could you suggest one or two other people I might contact for further information?
- Do you have any additional advice for me?
- Would you mind if I contacted you again if I think of any other questions?
- Would you mind reviewing my resume and making any suggestions?
- Don’t forget the business card. Add this to your business card file!

After the Interview

- Make notes to yourself on the content of the interview for future reference.
- Follow-up on any suggestions made (articles, books, meetings, or contacts).
- Send a thank you letter, e-mail, or LinkedIn message within 24 hours stating your appreciation for their time and information. Mention specific points or suggestions that were particularly helpful and state your plans to follow through.
- Keep in touch.