

A beginner's guide to networking – a detailed summary

Q: What is networking?

A: Everyone has a social network. Networking is about the connections that one makes. At a very simple level, your immediate networks are your family and close friends. Your wider networks may include your colleagues, friends of friends and perhaps random acquaintances that you've made along the way with whom you still remain in contact. Networking is a skill. It's about knowing what you want, knowing who to connect with and how to remain in contact with them. It's not only about connecting for the sake of connecting but ensuring that the connection is continuous.

Q: Why is it important?

A: Think about it. Without networks, you wouldn't be able to get anywhere. Networks inform and influence every aspect of your life. Why do you have the job that you do? Why do you like the coffee shop around the corner? Why a specific genre of music? All these areas are connected to social interactions. In essence, the people you know. Building these connections is a critical component of achieving what you want.

Q: What does it help to achieve?

A: Networking first and foremost is about expanding your networks. These networks could potentially lead to a variety of results; it could help you get a job, find out more about a particular topic or to be more specific, help you develop new connections.. For example, I work in agricultural research for development. The projects that I work with always mention how difficult it is to reach policy makers. This is where networking is key. Networks help you identify the people who may help you reach that policy maker, or if not a particular person, they at least help you identify an event. The best networking opportunity often arises at social events like cocktail receptions and work dinners where you can reference the more formal event that you had just attended.

Q: What are some tools that maybe useful for successful networking?

A: There are a plethora of tools that are available online. The most useful for professional networking however, is LinkedIn. LinkedIn is a professional networking platform that helps you identify and link up with not just those in your immediate networks but also those several connections away. Twitter is also a great tool that helps monitor interesting topics and speakers online. It's also quite an effective way to promote your messages and ideas once you've identified the right people who you would like to connect with. Yet another tool for networking is Google+. This falls between LinkedIn and Twitter and acts more like a dashboard. Google+ is more of a tool that could be used to "listen." LinkedIn is more of a tool for engagement. Professional blogs are also quite useful. The Guardian's Professional Development network is one such blog. Not only does it have interesting topics of conversation but it also helps identify the people leading these discussions which are an essential piece of networking.

Q: Is there a networking process or is it just intuition?

A: Some people are born networkers and social animals while others are introverts. Although this does help, it also helps to have a plan. Below is a step by step process for preparing a networking action plan to not only attend events but also start building social networks, both online and in the real world. For those of you attending our Master Class, this is your first task – so come prepared to network!