

BUILDING A PROFESSIONAL NETWORK

A Harvard Extension School Resource

[MIGNONE CENTER FOR CAREER SUCCESS](#)

Harvard University | Faculty of Arts and Sciences

[CAREER AND ACADEMIC RESOURCE CENTER](#)

Harvard Extension School



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START NOW:

Growing your network of professional relationships can be helpful in:

- Expanding your knowledge of and exploring new career options and interests
- Identifying resources relevant to your next career stage
- Gaining information about industry trends or organizations for which you might want to work
- Securing advice on how you might best prepare yourself for a certain field or position
- Uncovering potential job or internship opportunities

Most importantly, you'll expand your professional network for the future, for mutual benefit.

Expanding and maintaining your network of professional relationships in fields of interest is the single most effective method of securing your next opportunity!

THE BASICS

You need just a few things to launch a strategic networking plan:

- Curiosity; an interest in learning and exploration and an openness to meeting new people
- An idea of what you want to learn more about at this point in your career exploration or job search
- A brief personal introduction that will be tailored to those you are communicating with
- A system to manage and track contact interactions (for example an Excel spreadsheet, Google Doc, or contact management tools)
- A few tailored questions to start a conversation going and gain the information and advice you need to move forward
- It can be helpful to quickly brainstorm an initial target list of employers, so that you can give others examples of places you'd like to find contacts at and learn from, and so that you have a point to begin to identify people to speak with.

Interact with people who are working in areas related to your interests:

- Ask for suggestions from other people in your network; you never know who knows who!
- Find people via social media, including professional networking sites such as LinkedIn. Add Harvard Extension School to the Education section of your LinkedIn profile and use the [Alumni tab of school LinkedIn pages](#) to find people who have taken classes there who may be willing to speak with you.
- Meet with Harvard alumni and alumni from other institutions you have attended.
 - Firsthand Advisors (careerservices.fas.harvard.edu/resources/firsthand) is available to admitted degree program candidates to find Harvard alumni willing to conduct career conversations or mock interviews, or to review resumes.
 - The Harvard Alumni Association alumni database is available to Harvard Extension degree program graduates after graduation: alumni.harvard.edu/haa.
- Talk to academic department staff and faculty.
- Attend professional organization meetings.
- Join student clubs and networking groups.
- Get involved with community organizations; do volunteer work.
- Brainstorm other ways to meet people in your area of interest. Where do they gather?

Start simply: Set a goal to meet one new person whenever you attend any event, including through online events and classes!

NETWORKING ETIQUETTE and GUIDELINES

- Always be **professional, courteous, and considerate**.
- Be **genuine**. Possess a sincere desire to learn. Be authentic in asking for information and advice.
- Be **interested** in the people you meet. Most people enjoy the chance to answer questions and tell curious people about their careers and activities.
- **Give back**. Know enough about the people you have met to keep their needs in mind as you connect to others. You may be able to pass on valuable ideas, articles, and contacts that will be beneficial to them.
- Be well **prepared** for each interaction, whether they are in-person or virtual. When you ask for advice or help, and you know what you're looking for, it's easy for people to say "yes." Develop a list of questions ahead of time.
- **Don't explicitly ask for a job**. Let the contact decide if he or she is willing to pass on job leads to you. But do ask for advice on how to obtain jobs in that field.
- Do **ask for names** of other people in the field who you might speak to for more information.
- Find a **connection** to make introductions easier. Look for Harvard alumni through Firsthand, on the Harvard Alumni Association's alumni database (for alumni use), or LinkedIn.
- **Trust** that building a professional network and sharing information and resources with others will ultimately result in job leads, further contacts, and long-term professional relationships.
- Be **gracious**. Appreciate the time and effort of your contacts and send a **thank-you note**.
- **Stay in touch**. Check in periodically. Update people in your network when you make significant progress in your research or job search. As noted above, you can continue to share information or resources that they may find helpful, as well.

WHAT IS AN INFORMATIONAL MEETING?

In an informational meeting, often called an informational interview, you speak with a professional, typically employed in your field or role of interest, to gather career-related information and advice and to add to your long-term professional network. It is NOT a job-seeking meeting. Instead, you're seeking to gather information, advice and referrals (to other people or organizations) and to ask questions like:

- Can you tell me about your current role and your path to get here?
- Is there a typical career path in this field?
- What other organizations would you recommend I investigate that are doing great work in this field? Would you be able to suggest someone I should speak to there?
- Based on my background and skillset, would I be a fit for this career, or are there additional skills or expertise I should acquire before looking to make this transition?
- If I decide to pursue this path, how would you recommend I approach the search?
- What would you do differently if you were to do it again?

A Mutually Beneficial Process

Building a network doesn't come naturally to everyone. There are a variety of reasons people use to rationalize why they don't need to (or can't) build their professional network as they explore career options, search for a job, or develop their careers. One common misperception holding people back is: I'd probably be wasting their time! Why would they want to talk with ME?

The Benefits of Informational Meetings:

BENEFITS FOR YOU

- Get insider advice on entering a field; learn whether specific skillsets, experience or credentials are necessary.
- Gain an impression of the work environment.
- Learn about current trends and vocabulary used in the field.
- Have a professional in the field critique your resume.
- Practice presenting yourself in a low-stress situation.
- Ask questions that would generally be considered too direct in a job interview.
- Gain visibility in the field.
- Expand your network of contacts for the long term – maybe even develop a mentor.
- Build confidence in yourself and your decision to move into the field. – OR –
- Learn that a field is not for you.
- Refine your career options and generate others.
- Develop and maintain long-term, mutually beneficial relationships that may help you in your job search and professional development.

BENEFITS FOR THEM

- Get to share information about their job and career path.
- Pass along wisdom and advice.
- Give back – they likely got started the same way.
- Recognize you are a potential new colleague – a professional contact for THEM.
- May gain valuable information, resources, or contacts from you (now or in the future).
- Increase understanding of what potential employees in your demographic are interested in or looking for.
- Strengthen professional relationships with colleagues, e.g. by referring you to a colleague who eventually hires you.
- All with minimal time

Allows them to assess your:

- Personal/professional chemistry
- Initiative (sometimes, the only way in!)
- Communication skills

HOW DO I GET STARTED?

A. Who Should I Contact?

Create a list of potential contacts within your fields of interest. Look for people doing a job you'd like to do, in a field you'd like to investigate, or working for a company that interests you. It can help to begin with an initial "target list" of organizations in the field that you are interested in and then seek out people at those organizations. Contacts can be people you already know through a job, educational experience, or community activity, or people you have never met.

Obtain names of new contacts through:

People you already know. Career advisors, fellow students, friends, relatives, faculty, past and present colleagues, or supervisors may refer you to professionals in a variety of fields. Don't be afraid to tell people what you're looking to learn and what potential next steps you are exploring—you never know who has a great connection. Utilize your LinkedIn network to uncover these

potential connections.

- **Alumni contacts.** Alums have a common bond and often find it quite gratifying to be able to provide assistance to those following in their footsteps.
 - Firsthand: careerservices.fas.harvard.edu/resources/firsthand (available to matriculated degree program candidates) connects current degree students with Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences alumni and others who have volunteered to conduct career conversations, resume reviews or mock interviews.
 - Harvard's alumni database alumni.harvard.edu/haa (available to HES degree program alumni) houses the contact information for alumni who have indicated that they're willing to speak with others about their career paths.
 - Also see the Alumni tab on the LinkedIn pages for the schools you have attended, to find people who have taken classes at those institutions.
- **Industry directories and trade associations** can help you identify organizations that may interest you. Contacts within these organizations may be professionals in positions that you are interested in learning more about or managers of departments you might enjoy working in. Avoid human resource departments for this purpose (unless you're considering jobs in human resources!) since you're seeking information, not a job. Visit their website, use LinkedIn, or call the main number to secure the names/titles of appropriate individuals. You may be able to find email addresses simply by doing an online search or via sites such as Hunter.io or Rocketreach.co.
- **Databases**, such as Leadership Connect, Proquest One Business, and Factiva (available via databases.hollis.harvard.edu/), are helpful for searching trade journals for mentions of organizations, key people, trends, and events in different fields, or for finding company contact information.

B. How Should I Prepare?

Research: Read career literature, trade publications, company information, and biographical information. Find out as much about the individual, the organization, and career field as possible before you meet. It's better to use your expert contact as a resource for specific information and advice, rather than the basics. Information directly from your contact's employer's website is a great place to start. You can also prompt generative AI with the details of what information you are seeking, but be sure to verify your information by looking at the sources as well.

Questions: Think about what you hope to learn and develop questions that will elicit that—whether it be information, advice, or referrals to other people or organizations. Write a list before you begin to help prepare.

Questions you may want to ask include:

- **A detailed description of the job beyond what you can find in your research, or to verify that research is accurate:** What challenges, rewards, or frustrations have you encountered? How do you typically spend your time on the job? What kinds of decisions do you make? What does a typical day look like? Where does this position or division fit within the larger organization?
- **Desirable skills, education, and experience:** What training or experience is required? What did you do in preparation for entering the field, and what would you do now if you were currently exploring the space? What courses could I take, skills should I possess, or experience might be valuable to me if I decide to enter the field?

- **Career paths and advancement:** What are your career goals? What kinds of opportunities do you see this job preparing you for? Where do people in this field normally move on to next?

Other important areas of discussion might include:

- **Lifestyle implications of the work:** e.g. travel, hours, pressure, flexibility, salary/benefits, family policy, security, etc. It's acceptable (and recommended) to ask about what range of salary you might expect upon entering at a specific level. Do NOT ask how much money the contact makes personally.
- **Work environment:** physical setting, people (colleagues and clients), organizational structure and culture—How does this job fit into the department's/ organization's structure? How does this department work with other departments, and which ones?
- **Current issues in the industry** (beyond what you've read): What trends or changes are occurring in the field? Have these changes affected pathways into the industry? If so, in what ways? What companies do they feel are doing great work in this space?
- **Ways to get more information and add to your network:** Ask how they stay up-to-date on the industry. What journals, professional organizations, names of additional contacts, sites or newsletters that share job opportunities in the industry would they recommend?

Be sure to avoid questions that can be answered "Yes" or "No." Open-ended questions (particularly "What" and "How" questions) that will allow your contact to respond with the most useful information and advice. Making sure to ask at least one information-gathering question, one advice-seeking question, and one question regarding potential other people to speak with (referrals) will ensure that you achieve your goals for the meeting.

C. How Should I Go About Obtaining a Meeting?

Start with your least intimidating contacts first. **Write an email, message on LinkedIn or call:** Call first if they have specified that they would like to be contacted by phone. Write first if you think the contact would appreciate having a brief introduction and a sense of what you're exploring. (See the sample introductory email.) Remember, even when writing, it's preferable to schedule a personal conversation either by phone, a virtual meeting platform or in person to get the most out of the conversation. Experiment and decide what works best for you.

Explain what you want (NOT a job, just information and advice), let them know (or remind them) how you found their name, suggest a time frame (perhaps a particular week) a particular place (preferably their workplace) or video format (such as Zoom), and suggest a limited amount of time (perhaps 20 minutes). Be prepared to settle graciously for an over-the-phone meeting if it's the only alternative. However, if a phone meeting is suggested, it's worth asking if Zoom or other online meeting tools might be an option.

Sample Introductory Emails

This email message is to request an informational meeting to learn more about an alumna's experience as a book editor. The note is careful to avoid asking for a job, or for anything other than the chance to listen and ask questions. The email includes a brief "elevator speech" that summarizes the student's interests.

Sample 1:

Dear [Name]:

I found your name via the Harvard Extension School page on LinkedIn and very am interested in learning more about the work you do at Rivian. I have spent the past decade as a project manager in [industry or company] and am now also studying part-time for a Master of Liberal Arts, Management. I have recently been exploring a potential transition to the electric vehicle industry.

Would it be possible to take 20 minutes of your time to speak at your convenience, to ask you some questions about your role, the industry, and any advice you might have? Your insights would be much appreciated.

I can be contacted at jane_doe@gmail.com or 617-555-XXXX.

Thank you in advance for your time!

Sincerely,
Jane Doe

Sample 2:

Dear Erica Jones:

I found your name through the Harvard Extension School LinkedIn page and am interested in learning about your experience in book publishing. I studied English at Harvard Extension School and will be graduating with a Bachelor of Liberal Arts in May 202X.

Book publishing is an area that I have been interested in for some time. I am currently a writer for *Arts Today* magazine and also sit on the editorial board. Prior to attending Harvard, I contributed to a local weekly as a movie critic. I am curious to learn more about the field of book publishing from your experience on the inside, to determine if a transition into that side of the industry would make sense as the next step.

I will be in New York the week of October 9th and would greatly appreciate the chance to speak with you about your experience. If meeting with you at that time is not convenient, perhaps we could talk by phone or Zoom at another time.

Please let me know if there are any particular dates/times that work best with your schedule.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Your Name

Note: Don't be afraid to follow up if you don't hear back from your contact within a week or so. Consider changing the way you contact them. For example, if you sent an email the first time, try following up by phone or LinkedIn or via an introduction from a mutual contact. People are busy, and you will likely not be a top priority. **But this does not mean they are not willing to speak to you.** Persistence is important, and people often appreciate the reminder that they haven't returned your call, and that you are still interested in speaking with them. However, know that you won't have a 100% response rate and be aware of the tone of your follow-up. Don't take a lack of response as rejection—but as an indication of how demanding their job may be on their time.

Consider asking if there might be someone else on their team that they would suggest you speak with. If you have not heard back after the initial outreach plus a follow-up, focus your attention on other contacts from your list. It can be helpful to read your correspondence out loud before you send it, in order to hear the tone of your emails and give the best impression.

Also, do not attach a resume to an initial introductory email. Not only can attachments increase the likelihood that your message will go into spam, but you want to focus on the meeting as information gathering first-and-foremost. Not asking for a job.

Sample phone introduction:

“Hello Ms. Smith, my name is Emilio Sanchez, and I currently work in communications for [name of organization] and am also a Master’s student in Journalism at Harvard Extension School. I got your name from your recent article in *The New York Times*. I’d love to hear more about your career and any advice you may have for someone looking to enter the field, and was wondering if you would be willing to set up a time to share your experience with me in a brief meeting. I can be reached at [phone number]. Thank you for your time.”

Note: If you call and get voicemail, briefly introduce yourself and explain your interest in wanting to connect. You could say you’ll try calling back but also leave both a phone number and email address where you may be reached. Consider following up by email after some time has passed, referencing the phone message.

D. Keep Track of Your Networking Contacts

When you're actively building your network for a job or conducting informational meetings, it's necessary to keep yourself organized!

Set up a spreadsheet, a relational database, or whatever organization method works best for you. Here's the type of information you should track, and some sample data:

Contact Name: Børge Brende
Title: President and CEO
Organization: World Economic Forum
Action Step: Send thank-you note [always update with most recent action step needed]
To-do by: September 19
Referral Source: Organization website
Website: www.worldbank.org/
Email: Contact@weforum.org [the contact's direct email]
Phone: +41 (0) 22 869 1212

Contact History:

	Contact 1	Contact 2	Contact 3
Date:	Sept. 1	Sept. 10	Sept. 14
Type:	email	phone, voice mail	On-site info mtg
Notes:	introduced self Requested info mtg	polite reminder requested info mtg	copious notes on entire visit!
Follow-ups:	phone	return call; set date	Thank you note
Status:	DONE	DONE	TO-DO by Sept. 15

Referred to: name 1, name2

[make entries for all these, using Børge Brende as the Referral Source]

Do's and Don'ts of the Informational Meeting Process

Do act as professionally as you would for any meeting: email to confirm a day or so ahead, dress appropriately for the setting, arrive a little early so you can experience the work environment and relax before your appointment if in person. For phone and video meetings, ensure that you have a quiet space and that your technology is working, and the surrounding environment is appropriate, if you will be on camera.

Do bring a list of questions with you as a means of guiding the conversation, and note any suggestions or referrals during the meeting, being sure to clarify any terms you don't know or anything you don't understand. Questions to gather information, advice, and referrals to other people to speak with are key. Missing one of those areas of questioning can mean a conversation is not as informative as you would like. Be sure to update these notes with what you have learned immediately after the meeting. Afterwards, let the contact know when you follow up on the steps they recommend.

Do listen carefully to the person you are speaking with. Focus on hearing their story, while you ask follow up questions carefully.

Do respect your host's time. Stick to the time frame suggested in your email or phone conversation unless you're invited to stay longer. Be sensitive to nonverbal clues that it's time to end the meeting.

Do bring a copy of your resume along to the meeting if in person (just as reference to you and your background, not trying to obtain a job). You do not need to send a resume in advance of the meeting, unless requested by the contact, since this is an informational career conversation.

Do consider asking the contact if they would be willing to provide any feedback on your resume, if there is time in the session and it feels appropriate (they may ask you to send it along later, depending on their timeframe). Ask for advice on how to best present yourself, what skills may need refining, which areas need attention or development to best qualify you for that field if you decide to pursue that direction. Also, be sure to ask for advice or other experience/knowledge needed for the field.

Do offer to pay if you've gone out for lunch or coffee for your meeting. But you may accept graciously if they insist on paying.

Do ask about compensation in a general way, but **Don't** ask about the advisor's personal income package. You might say, "If I were to enter this field in a related role, what salary and other forms of compensation might I expect?" Inquiring with individuals in the field, coupled with salary research on the web, will prepare you well for negotiating in the future.

Don't ask your contact for a job, even indirectly. That's not what you are there for.

Do open doors to additional contacts by asking "Are there other people you think I should meet as I continue to investigate this field?" Or, ask about potential people to speak with at organizations or in departments that come up in the course of the conversation.

Do keep your contact network informed of your career development progress and keep in touch. Maintaining professional contact relationships is an ongoing process that will benefit you throughout your career.

Do email a timely thank you note expressing your appreciation for their time and advice. This is important regardless of how helpful you perceive the conversation to be. In this note, you can mention

something you learned or found interesting from the conversation and, if relevant, mention any next steps or follow up you had discussed.

Don't speak with only one or two people and assume their views are representative of the field. Continue to develop your network!

Do follow up with contacts you receive as well as with professional organizations or other resources you are referred to, and let your referring contacts know that you have done so.

Developing your “Elevator Pitch”

Over the course of your job search, it will be critically important to communicate to people who you are and what it is that you are looking for in a position. An “elevator pitch” serves as a professional introduction when speaking with people about your interests, related background or skillset. You may have a 15-second version to use at a job fair, a 30-second version for a networking event, and a 60-second one for kicking off an informational meeting. Below are some ways to start thinking about what you'll say:

- What are your current roles?
- What is the career interest that you are looking to explore further, and how has that developed?
- What skills and experience have you developed that may be applicable to this field? What is it that you want to know from someone in this field?

You won't have just one elevator pitch. Develop your basic introduction, then alter it to be appropriate for different audiences and situations. PRACTICE delivering your introduction to friends (and to yourself). Set clear intentions before you attend an event or meeting, preparing how you will launch a conversation, what you will share, what questions you might ask, and following up with a tailored note or LinkedIn connection request.

Once you feel comfortable and natural, having the most important elements of your message in mind, it will be much easier to adapt your initial presentation to your audience.

Remember: With a **concise, articulate, and relevant introduction**, delivered with confidence, eye contact, and a smile, you will make a **GREAT FIRST IMPRESSION**.

For more networking tips, watch [Networking: Building Relationships for Career Success](#). In addition, you can find out ways that generative AI can be a resource in all aspects of your job search through the MCS site on [AI for Professional Development and Exploration](#).