

Building Professional Connections

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07/25

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Why Start Now?

Many graduate students wait to think about networking until they're applying for jobs. But building professional connections early can transform your career exploration and job search. A strong network can help you:

- Explore career options and clarify interests
- Get candid advice from experienced professionals
- Learn more about organizations and industries
- Identify opportunities for informational conversations
- Discover job or internship leads

Bottom line: Talking to people is one of the most effective ways to find opportunities.

Networking Basics

Most jobs are filled through connections—not cold applications. The good news? You don't need to be an extrovert or have a huge network to get started. You just need:

- A short personal introduction (aka your “elevator pitch”)
- A clear sense of what you're curious about
- A system to track outreach (spreadsheet, notes, or app)
- A few thoughtful questions to guide conversations
- A genuine interest in learning from others

Places to build connections:

- Ask mentors, faculty, staff and peers to refer you to people they know
- Use platforms like [Firsthand Advisors](#) and LinkedIn to connect with alumni
- Explore the [Harvard Alumni Association](http://alumni.harvard.edu) (alumni.harvard.edu)
- Leverage the Harvard Griffin GSAS [Virtual Coffee Chat program](#)
- Join [grad student groups](#), attend professional association meetings, or volunteer
- Participate in [events hosted by MCS](#) or locally in your academic departments

Start small: Set a goal to meet one new person each week.

What Is an Informational Conversation?

An informational conversation (also called an informational interview) is a chance to learn from someone working in a role, field, or organization of interest. It's not a job interview (though in some cases – it could be!) Traditionally, it is a space to ask for **insights, not offers**.

Examples of questions you might ask:

- How did you get into this field?
- What skills or experiences from graduate school helped you the most?
- What advice would you give someone starting out?

Why it works: Most people enjoy sharing their path and insights—and conversations often lead to referrals, new ideas, or opportunities down the road.

Etiquette & Best Practices

Ethical, thoughtful outreach matters. Here's how to build authentic and respectful connections:

- **Do your homework.** Learn about the person and their role before you reach out.
- **Be concise and respectful.** Be clear about what you're asking for (we suggest 20 minutes)
- **Be honest.** You're not asking for a job—you're seeking advice.
- **Show curiosity.** Ask meaningful questions, not ones you could easily look up online.
- **Don't ghost.** Always follow up with a thank-you note—and keep in touch.
- **Give back.** Share resources or contacts when relevant. Networking is mutual.

How Do I Get Started?

A. Who to Contact

Create a list of people in roles, fields, or organizations you're curious about. Start with:

- Faculty, peers, former employers, and friends
- Harvard alumni via Firsthand, LinkedIn, or the alumni directory
- People featured in industry panels, MCS Coffee Chats, Information Sessions or Career Fairs
- Industry newsletters or conference rosters
- Leaders and members of professional associations specific to your field (LinkedIn groups, too!)

B. How to Prepare

- **Research:** Learn about the person's background and the industry. Use ImaginePhD, Beyond the Professoriate, LinkedIn, Vault, and company websites.
- **Draft questions:** Tailor to your goals—whether that's understanding a role, a work environment, or a transition from academia. See sample questions at the end of this guide.

C. How to Reach Out

Start with a message on LinkedIn or a short email. Here's a format you can adapt:

LinkedIn (under 200 characters):

"Hi (Name)! I see that we both come from (X) dept at GSAS! I'd love to hear about your career path beyond academia if you'd be open to a 20 min chat. If possible – could you share your email so that I can send along an invitation with suggested times?"

Sample Email:

Subject: Harvard Griffin GSAS Grad Student – Interested in Your Career Story

Dear Dr. Ahmed,

I'm a PhD candidate in [Your Field] at Harvard exploring careers in [Field]. I came across your profile on LinkedIn and was inspired by your transition from academia to [Organization/Role]. I'd be grateful for 20 minutes of your time to learn about your career path and hear any advice you might have for someone with my background. Thank you for considering. I'm happy to suggest dates and times and connect via Zoom or phone at your convenience.

Best regards,

First & Last Name

Tip: Follow up once if you don't hear back in a week or two. People are busy, but polite persistence often pays off.

D. Using Generative AI for Networking Preparation

Generative AI can help you prepare for networking ethically and effectively. Use tools to:

- Draft outreach messages or thank-you notes if you're experiencing writer's block
- Brainstorm thoughtful questions for an informational interview
- Polish your elevator pitch or LinkedIn summary

But: Always start with your own ideas, and don't copy AI-generated messages verbatim. Use AI to clarify and enhance—not replace your voice. Tailored, thoughtful messages are what build trust and spark connection and employers can really tell when people are simply copying and pasting.

Reminder: See our [“AI for Career Exploration”](#) resource for more tips and best practices.

E. Keep Track of Your Contacts

Staying organized will help you follow up, reflect, and keep your momentum. Create a contact tracker with fields like:

- Name, Title, Organization
- Date of Contact
- Key Insights Shared
- Action Items
- Follow-Up Date
- People/Resources They Recommended

F. Networking Do's and Don'ts

Do:

- Treat each conversation like a professional interview
- Prepare your questions and show genuine curiosity
- Respect the time limit (usually 20–30 minutes)
- Ask if they might suggest other individuals with whom you could speak
- Express gratitude and follow up

Don't:

- Ask for a job, even indirectly
- Lead with your resume or attach it unprompted
- Ask someone's salary (ask about salary ranges instead)
 - An exception would be with a more senior-level individual who can share ranges for newly minted PhDs, for instance
- Ask for a referral to a role before establishing rapport
- Over-rely on one person's opinion—build multiple perspectives

Your Pitch

You'll need a short, tailored way to introduce yourself. Try crafting:

- A **15-second** version for networking events
- A **30-second** version for informational interviews
- A **60–90-second** version for interviews

Start with:

- Who you are (degree, current research and work)
- What you're exploring or interested in
- What transferable skills you bring
- What you do beyond your research (think leadership experience, teaching, experiential learning)
- What you're hoping to learn from the conversation

Practice aloud. The more natural it feels, the easier it'll be to adapt in the moment.

Sample Questions for Informational Conversations

Career Path & Trajectory

- What led you to your current role?
- Would you do anything differently if you were starting out now?

Day-to-Day Work

- What does a typical day or week look like?
- What do you enjoy most—and what’s challenging?

Skills & Preparation

- What skills or experiences from graduate school were most helpful to you?
- How did you prepare for your transition into this role?
- When did you start to talk to your advisor/PI about your career plans?

Work Culture & Lifestyle

- What’s the work environment like?
- How does your work/life balance differ from your time in graduate school?

Industry Trends

- What trends or changes are shaping your field right now?
- How are new technologies (e.g., AI) impacting your industry?

Compensation

- What’s the typical entry-level salary range in this field?

Next Steps

- What would you suggest I read, attend, or follow to learn more?
- Are there 2–3 people you recommend I talk to next?

Final Thoughts

Networking isn’t about purely “selling yourself”—it’s about building relationships, asking thoughtful questions, and learning from others’ experiences. The more open and authentic you are, the more people will want to help you. And when you’re in a position to help others someday, pay it forward.