

How To Build A Powerful Professional Network Early In Your Career

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It goes without saying that a professional network is valuable, yet if you're just starting out in your career, cobbling together a purposeful network of contacts can feel like an overwhelming task. You may envision making awkward small talk in a room full of strangers, but in reality, building a professional network doesn't have to be cringe-worthy or painful. In fact, you may already have a network you didn't know existed. Here's how to create and cultivate a professional network you can leverage now and throughout your career:

1. **Prioritize Your Objectives**

Determining your needs—for instance, job offers, sales leads or career mentorship and advice—will help you better target and prevent you from over-relying on whom and what you already know. Based on your top priorities, determine what type of person could best help you. It might be as broad as an industry or as focused as someone in a specific role or employed at a target company. Once you know whom you need to meet, you can be on the lookout for him or her.

2. **Find Common Ground**

Successful networking involves building authentic relationships. The easiest way to start a conversation and build a rapport that gets you to the real thing is to start with a common topic of interest. Find events or social opportunities attended by people who have the same interests, such as your college's local alumni gathering, a happy hour sponsored by your building or a volunteer opportunity. For years I shared an early morning workout and coffee with a group of ten people. Nearly a decade later, I was looking for a corporate attorney to represent my new business and immediately thought of a lawyer in that group. While we knew nothing about each other's professions, our personal connection helped us form an authentic relationship that benefitted us both.

3. **Consider People You Have Already Impressed**

Early in my career, I happily stumbled upon a familiar face at a stereotypical (painfully awkward) tech networking event. He was the father of a family I had babysat throughout college, someone whom I had never thought to ask about his profession. Surprised to see each other in a new context, I told him I was starting a business and looking for sales and PR contacts. He shared that he was the publisher of one of the country's biggest business publications. Having made a positive impression on him years earlier, he gladly introduced me to people in the room who might be helpful to my new business. Who would have guessed that being a responsible babysitter would have led to key business connections? Whether it's connections made in your side gig, friends' parents, a favorite professor, or neighbors in your building, you may be closer to your next career move or networking goal than you think.

3. Pay it Forward

Be a networking giver as much as a taker. Recently I was able to pay it forward by making an introduction for a fabulous babysitter whom I was about to lose when she graduated from college. I was impressed with her work ethic and determination, and gladly put in a good word for her at a finance company that interested her. You don't have to be far along in your career to have something to give, and you likely have more power than you realize. Maybe you are in a junior role at a large company. It's likely you may meet someone who is looking to do work with your company, and you may be able to make an introduction. The sharing usually comes full circle.

5. Don't Overlook Your Current Gig

If you've been at your job awhile and have proven yourself, it may be time to have a realistic conversation with your boss and coworkers about your career goals. They likely value you and want what's best for your career—even if it's not with them—and may be exactly what you need to land your next job. When an employee told me he'd like to move from product to marketing to round out his experience, I suggested a job opportunity I knew a friend of mine was looking to fill. While I hated to lose him—and would have moved him to a better-fitting role within my company if I'd had one—I respected his career goals and was glad to pass along a well-deserved reference.

6. Put Yourself in Front of People You Want to Meet

The idea of deliberately putting yourself in front of people may sound a bit crazy, but it can work. A perfect example is a recent Bay Area transplant I met when I called for an Uber in downtown San Francisco. He was my driver. After spending 20 minutes together in traffic, I learned that he was also a well-qualified lawyer and an entrepreneur looking to secure a business development role at a tech startup. He was driving Uber while job searching because he suspected that many Uber riders in the area worked at tech companies and he could strike up a conversation with them in hopes of a warm job lead. I was so impressed with him and his ingenuity that I happily hooked him up with a meeting with a recruiter who works for a venture capitalist firm and helps to identify talent for their portfolio companies. Again, it's all about getting out there and connecting with others.

Whether you are building a network from scratch or growing an existing one you can leverage throughout your career, don't stop at initial conversations. It takes time to cultivate relationships. When you find ways to authentically connect with people, time with them becomes a source of enjoyment, instead of a task. If you value your connections and make them a priority, there is no doubt that they will open doors and enrich your professional—and personal—life for years to come.

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