The Art of Networking

Networking. Informational interviews. These concepts reduce some people to nervous explanations of why they can’t do them, or guilty admissions that they’ve never tried. Those who have developed professional and social networks, however, benefit from the relationships for years to come and sometimes even find the process enjoyable!

Job hunting and transition to the professional world don’t necessarily have to be something Yale students start thinking about in their junior year, and definitely not simply about gaining practical knowledge and skills while forgoing most of the joy from intellectual discussions at Yale. It can be an ongoing and continuous process from which students can learn and enjoy.

—Dilong Sun ’15

The Basics

Whether your goal is to find a job, explore career possibilities through informational interviews, take the next step in your career, make professional or social contacts in a new city, or change careers, networking can be one of the most effective tools available to you. Opportunities for networking range from contacting strangers who might have career information you need to asking the person who lived in your entryway your sophomore year where to find the best gym in town.

Social networking is something most of you are already very comfortable with. It’s how you stay connected to your friends, get to know new people, decided where and with whom to take spring breaks. Learning, researching, and developing relationships are all skills that each of you have utilized and developed while at Yale. Professional networking involves putting these skills to use to formally connect with individuals for career development.
For some, meeting people can be intimidating. If that describes you, think of networking as a research project. The answers, however, are not in the library or on the internet; they are known among the people working in the career area or social setting of your choice. Since you don’t know who has the most beneficial information, your task is to contact enough people to find the person who has the most appropriate answer for your situation. You can correspond with people through email, phone conversations, Skype or face-to-face meetings.

Networking for Career Advice

The first step in professional networking is to clarify your career goals or to focus on one or several obtainable goals (for example, finding a position with a public relations firm in Philadelphia). Be sure you do some preliminary reading and research to gain an understanding what a particular career field or specific position entails before you begin reaching out to people in that field.

Next, do plenty of research to identify organizations that hire people for such positions; and don’t forget, OCS staff and online resources can help you with this. Some of this research may result in finding actual job openings! Don’t forget to look beyond the obvious. For example, public-relations opportunities do not exist only with PR firms; in fact, many organizations have a PR department in house. Remember to look in both the for-profit and non-profit sectors.

As you prepare a list of organizations, try to identify specific people (including the spellings of their names and their job titles) who might be helpful to you. Look in the Yale Career Network and on LinkedIn for Yale alumni at the organizations you’re targeting. In addition to this research, ask everyone you know if they might know of someone who could provide advice. Sometimes the most helpful person is someone you see every day but didn’t know had a perfect connection for you!

As you compile a list of people to contact, prepare questions you’d like to ask each person. For an informational interview/meeting, keep the questions general to the career field and not specific to a job search. Include questions about the background and career path of the people you contact. (For example, “How did you learn about the best PR firms in Philadelphia?” “What would you do differently if you could do it again?” “Are there professional associations that I might join in town?”) You can find additional sample informational interview questions on the OCS website.
When you contact people to see if they might be able to offer advice in person or in a phone conversation, be gracious and diplomatic. And remember to be flexible regarding time and location. Some people will not be interested and may even be annoyed. Others may say they are willing to meet but don’t have the time. Others will be glad to meet but may want you to further define the purpose of the meeting. If you have made it clear that you are seeking general advice about a specific career field in a specific location, you may be able to avoid responses such as, “We don’t have any openings right now so please don’t bother me.” Yale alumni have too often been asked to provide job leads by demanding students or recent graduates who don’t appreciate the etiquette of networking. Many alums are willing to assist as long as you make it clear that advice is what you’re seeking. It’s inappropriate to expect them to do your work for you as you seek job openings.

One of the most valuable parts of a Yale education is the community of hard-working and intelligent students and alumni with whom you have the chance to connect. Use the Yale Clubs and the online Yale Career Network, as well as networking resources such as LinkedIn, to connect with alums in your field of interest or in the city where you are planning to live. You may not hit it off with everyone you contact, but keep at it. Networking takes time and effort, but it can be extremely beneficial in helping you achieve your career goals, and it can be exciting to talk with interesting and dynamic professionals in your field(s) of interest.

Why would anyone agree to an informational interview or offer advice to a stranger? Networking benefits employers as well. Posting and advertising job openings, recruiting, reviewing résumés, and interviewing requires a great deal of time, energy, and money from employers. Those who provide informational interviews and assist newcomers to their career fields will often have a pool of talent at their fingertips. When an employee leaves, employers with files of people who have come in for informational interviews and/or sent letters of inquiry may be able to skip the time-consuming step of advertising the position and wading through large stacks of applications.

Networking Through Professional Associations

As you begin your first job or job search, explore the professional associations in your field. Every industry offers a wealth of such organizations. Some are broadly aligned with an industry or focused on specific types of jobs within an industry, others align with identity groups such as race, ethnicity, or gender. Many associations organize social and networking events, yearly conferences
and professional development workshops. Some provide resources to members through websites, newsletters, or professional journals. Participate as often as you can and take time to cultivate relationships with the people you meet. Be sure not to be shy at receptions—if you see someone you want to meet, approach them, introduce yourself, and ask about their work. If you are still seeking a job, find out if you can attend as a newcomer or guest. Get involved by participating on a committee or volunteering at an event. The people you meet through your professional associations have the potential to help you begin or advance your career.

The Association of Yale Alumni provides similar networking organizations through the Yale Clubs found in most cities. (For information on Yale Clubs, see “Keeping the Bulldog Alive.”) Almost every city or town also has organizations for newcomers, singles, or people with a shared interest in an art or sport, and there are many opportunities to get involved in religious organizations, cultural groups, and athletic leagues. Participating in these groups will help you explore your new location and continue to expand your professional and social networks.

Maintaining Your Professional Network

Some people in your network are or will become your friends and will continue to be in close contact with you. Others may talk with you only once. Regardless, it is important that you express your appreciation through thank-you notes; these will help to solidify your place in their memories. It is also essential that you respect the time someone made for you by refraining from sharing that person’s name inappropriately. You may find a reason or need to ask for further advice as you continue your career, and you want to assure that the door remains open for future communication.