

Start to Develop YOUR Professional Network

You have got to start somewhere, it is easiest to start now. Networking is all about getting to know people. If getting to know someone is difficult for you, take small steps to build your level of comfort. Practice introducing yourself to people you don't know well. This is a good skill to develop and will become easier the more you do it. Networking should take place every day!

It is always important to work on your professional network, not just while you are in college. It is a great way to find people to collaborate with on a project, look for a new position, find a mentor, seek advice, gather information, or to just connect with other professionals.

Remember, anyone you've come in contact with at some point is a part of your network. Make the most of every opportunity. You have endless opportunities to begin building a broad and deep network of individuals while you're still in college to ensure you have a job waiting for you after graduation.

How to Start

Ask family members, friends, or acquaintances for people who may be associated with the kind of opportunity you are seeking. The opportunity to connect is all around you; sometimes you just need to ask the question: "Who do I know who may know someone who is doing _____."

References from previous positions are always valuable, but you also never know who you may meet! Be present and work hard in every position you have, whether it is related to what you want to do or just paying the bills. Hard work and a good attitude go a long way. Always do your best and keep relationships positive. Utilize the resources you may already have with your current job or internship. Recognize that networking is now a strategy for learning how to improve on the job. Getting to know other people with whom you can share information, explore ideas, and problem-solve will be an asset to your long-term career success.

Social Media

Leverage the social media designed to help you build your *professional* network! Create a **LinkedIn** profile to outline your past skills and experience, but also write it for the kind of position you want in the future. Make sure that your photo is professional, not one where you are obviously cropped out of a group photo. Take the time to keep your account up-to-date; several recruiters use LinkedIn to proactively find candidates for openings in their company.

Start networking with people in your field and/or industry. You can send them a brief message that introduces yourself and your mission. Avoid the generic message option and make it personal, as well as concise and to the point!

Don't be afraid to reach out through your existing network to re-connect, even if it has been a while. You never know how people in your past can help to make future job opportunities a reality. NEVER use the initial networking opportunities to ask for a job! Give yourself time to make a good first impression and be memorable.

Other Networking Suggestions

Connect with alumni while you are in school and after graduation. Stay connected with the Montana Tech Alumni Association. Often times companies send alumni to represent their company at the Career Fair, these alumni are familiar with the majors and qualities of prior graduates. They may be great contacts for your professional network.

Join professional groups, as a student member. Check out professional organizations within the local community. See what groups are available through LinkedIn as well. This is a great way to expand the number of professionals with whom you may have something in common.

Get out of your bubble! College is a great time to find things that interest you and for you to gain experience (even if it is not related to your career field). Volunteer and use the skills you are learning in the classroom to help others. People you meet are great additions to your network. Diversity of the people in your professional network help to connect you in unforeseen ways.

Talk to successful people. Who are some people you admire (either what they are doing or where they are working)? Don't be afraid to reach out to them, but also be respectful of their time. Be honest about who you are and why you are interested in talking with them. Usually, people enjoy talking about themselves, their experience, and helping someone else out. Set aside time on your calendar each month to keep up with contacts you've made and meet new ones.

As you network, you must be thoughtful about the individuals you decide to pursue. Growing a big network with a large number of contacts whom aren't necessarily beneficial to your career plans may look impressive, but in reality doesn't help you. Sometimes a promotion is about knowing the right person or being in the right place at the right time.

Networking Dos and Don'ts

Do ...

- Take the initiative at a meeting or gathering and introduce yourself.
- Learn a person's first name, shake hands, and repeat the name in the conversation.
- Make small talk, maintain eye contact, and look for a common connection.
- Be active in introducing others and explaining any common link they might have to each other.
- Have a sentence or two prepared that describes the professional you, in a concise friendly way.
- Invite someone you want to get to know to a party or event you are hosting or attending.
- Offer to be a resource to others.

Don't ...

- Don't be a pest. Once you cross the line it is hard to recover.
- Don't exclude people. Everyone has connections in both low and high places.
- Skip the one-upmanship. It does not make friends or influence people.
- Don't monopolize the conversation.
- Don't over-drink. It will not make you more charming and it can be a deterrent to your image and purpose.

Final Thoughts Regarding Networking

- Stay in touch with people you like and respect even if they cannot help you immediately.
- Focus on building a relationship, a common mistake is being pushy or instantly making the other person feel like *just* a business contact. Once people begin to know you, they will be open to helping you, if they can.
- Do not be afraid to strike up conversation with strangers. Talk to a wide range of people everywhere you go. You may meet someone who helps you at a cocktail party, plane ride, wedding, or even a sporting event.
- Learn to ask "What do you do?" with comfort, sincerity, and interest.
- Become a better listener. Ask a question and be quiet until you hear the answer.
- Practice saying "How can I help you?" Networking is a give and take activity.
- Do not forget thank you letters and e-mails acknowledging time spent together. This shows sincerity and also keeps you in their mind.