It is estimated that around 70% of jobs are not advertised or given to employment agencies. Networking is a way of accessing these ‘hidden’ jobs and is an essential part of successful job searching. If used appropriately, it is a powerful technique in gaining employment.

What is Networking?

Most of us do it without being conscious of it! We talk, communicate, listen, meet people and establish relationships, day in and day out – when we do that we are networking. Networking for careers or employment purposes can be defined as:

- Establishing contact/connections with people who work in the field which interests you
- Establishing contact with people who are in a position to offer employment
- Obtaining information from others that will assist you to make better decisions, plans and applications
- Producing a list of people from whom to get information, advice and suggestions

Your Personal Network

If you think about all the people you know and consider all the people they know, you already have a sizable “audience” witnessing your job search endeavours. Make use of them by talking about your aspirations, objectives and skills. Your personal network is huge when you stop to think about it. The more people who know that you are looking for work and know what your skills and experience are, the more likely you are to land an interview.

For example: If your friend’s Mum or Dad work in a marketing company, see if you can talk to them about their role and marketing ‘in general’. If your flatmate has a sister working in computing, ask if you can meet her to find out about the computing industry. A person-to-person contact forges a stronger relationship than a contact by phone, so it’s a good idea to try and arrange a meeting.

Getting started

Begin by listing all the people you know. Don’t be selective at this stage – your purpose is to generate a list with as many contacts as possible including:

- Personal contacts – friends, casual acquaintances
- Family contacts – go beyond your immediate family
- Neighbours – who do they know?
- Secondary school teachers, lecturers
- Work acquaintances – past and present
- Sporting and other mutual interest contacts – club members etc.

Work on your ‘old’ contacts first, as it is the best way of making new contacts. You will find your list keeps growing. Once you obtain work, you will also gather networking contacts and become part of a wider network.

Growing your network

There are a number of ways of expanding your existing network. Think about:

- Joining a professional association so you can attend professional development seminars, discussion forums and information evenings
- Attending conferences, workshops, trade shows and exhibitions relevant to your chosen industry
- Maintaining contact with your university acquaintances including fellow students, academic staff and alumni association.
- Considering voluntary work, temporary work or contract work – the more contacts the better!

Information-based networking

The initial stages of networking should be information-based. Request information and ask questions that will stimulate discussion, provide you with knowledge and help establish the connections you need. Avoid asking for favours or questions that most likely result in “no” for an answer, e.g., “Have you got a job for me?” Generally speaking it is best to keep your options open by exploring broad opportunities rather than specific employment possibilities.
In the initial phases of networking seek information on:

- What is happening currently in your area of interest
- The culture of an organisation
- Career structure/opportunities in the profession/company
- Skills the employer values
- Where your skills might contribute to the company or industry
- Ways of getting into the profession/company
- Other contacts that may be useful
- Employment openings e.g. new areas of expertise being sought

It may take time but hopefully the relationship you establish will result in your name being raised when a vacancy next occurs.

Networking questions

Your information-based networking might include questions such as those listed below:

- How did you break into this field?
- How should I prepare for an interview in this field?
- Where do you see a person like me fitting into this field?
- What's a typical career path for someone coming in at my level?
- What professional publications should I read?
- Do you know of any companies in the XYZ field that are expanding rapidly?
- Do you know of other professionals in the field I should contact?
- Can I keep in touch with you?
- Can I mention your name (if given a referral to a third party)?

Business Cards

As a student you may not be able to afford a professionally printed one, however, it is possible to develop your own business card.

Your card should include your:

- Name
- Contact address
- Telephone/fax/email
- Qualification

When you are given someone's card it is always useful to write on the back (later!) relevant information about the contact. This might include where you met the person, their area of interest/expertise and a brief summary of any information they provide, including the names of any contacts to follow up.

If necessary, compile a card file and make further notes about the contact. This information may be vital if you wish to contact them again, e.g., "I met you at….on….and we talked about….."

If through one of your contacts, a meeting is arranged, don't forget to follow up with a thank you letter (and where appropriate) a copy of your resume.

Follow up with your contacts is also important. If you do not keep in touch, they won't know if you're still seeking employment. It is also important because it's a way of ensuring your contacts keep you in mind.

Networking successfully

Successful networking is not something that happens by chance. Making your networks work involves:

Persistence – The wider you expand your network, the closer you get to someone who may have a job for you.

Research – Prepare yourself for each contact you make. The better prepared you are, the better the impression you will make.

Enthusiasm – Your contacts are more likely to help you if they sense your dedication to your job search.

Organisation – Don’t forget to keep accurate records of your contacts.