

# Networking 101 for New Grads

## Networking can feel intimidating – but it's an effective kick-start for a graduate's career.

Don't just walk by a potential professional connection. New graduates must invest significant effort in developing networking skills.

By [Robin Madell](#) June 10, 2014 | 10:33 a.m.

There's nothing most new college graduates want more than to land [their first job](#). Yet while it may have seemed simple as a student to find a summer job in restaurant or retail, your search ironically may get much harder when you're trying to put your college degree to work full time. In January, The Wall Street Journal reported that over the past 15 years, twenty-something college grads have experienced increasing difficulty securing entry-level jobs that require a Bachelor's degree.

To help overcome this challenge, grads should invest significant effort in developing their networking skills. Networking, which involves building mutually supportive relationships that can lead to information and opportunities, is one of the best ways for young job seekers to get a leg up in [a difficult job market](#).

Networking can feel intimidating to new job seekers – but research shows that many working adults have a strong inclination to help young people jump-start their careers. A nationwide survey conducted by Fairfield Inn & Suites revealed that 77 percent of adults are willing to help college graduates find work. This may be based partly on the desire to pay it forward, since 66 percent of respondents acknowledged the powerful role that networking has played in helping them maintain momentum in their own careers.

Here are some tips to help recent grads network more strategically:

**Think ahead.** Some young job seekers may put the cart before the horse in their networking tactics; identifying people to build relationships with before understanding what their own goals are for making connections. You need to know yourself and what you're looking for career-wise as a precursor to effective networking. That begins with identifying your value and potential career interests.

As an entry-level candidate who lacks direct work experience, you need to [identify your transferable skills](#) – like problem solving, critical thinking and time management – that have value in the workplace. Once you've brainstormed these, Bob LaBombard, CEO of national college recruiting firm GradStaff, Inc., suggests thinking of real-life examples of when you've demonstrated these skills, so that you can share these once you start networking.

LaBombard also recommends identifying potential career interests as part of your preparation for networking. "Consider past experiences in college coursework and group projects, athletics, extracurricular activities, volunteer work, internships, summer jobs, part-time work, etc., that may indicate careers of interest to you," he says. "For example, people with serving experience in a

restaurant may be good candidates for customer-facing positions in sales, account management, project management, etc.”

**Leave your comfort zone.** Most newbie networkers turn to friends and family for first-time networking, and that’s a great start. But to expose yourself to wider opportunities, you should branch out beyond the obvious – such as thinking outside the box in your use of online tools. “Networking off the beaten path can result in great opportunity,” says Yair Riemer, chief marketing officer at CareerArc Group, which owns websites like Internships.com. “Interested in a particular industry or company? Take a look at the influencers in that space, and reach out to them via social media. Participate in the comments section on the leading blogs relevant to your industry or passion.” Riemer adds that networking in these nontraditional places – in the comments section of blogs, Twitter, etc.,—is a great supplement to the traditional networking you should pursue via friends, family and your college alumni association.

**Develop an icebreaker.** Once you have an idea about your goals and potential venues for making contacts, it’s time to move into actual networking. Yet for many job seekers, the conversation and communication involved can be the most difficult part. To break the ice, LaBombard advises new networkers to consider how a simple statement can allow you to launch a conversation. “State who you are, what you’re studying, when you expect to graduate and what type of work you want to do after graduation,” he says. “Keep it simple – not too long or short. Above all, remember to use a firm handshake, maintain good eye contact, smile and be confident.” Once you’ve got the dialogue flowing, LaBombard suggests expanding the conversation by asking open-ended questions that require explanation and can’t be answered with yes or no.

**Track your contacts.** Preparation and tracking are important both before meeting new contacts and afterward. These days it’s a no-brainer to use corporate websites and LinkedIn before an event to learn in advance about the people and companies you’ll meet. “This type of preparation will impress the people you meet, show your initiative, and demonstrate that you are serious about your job search,” LaBombard says.

But organization on the back-end is equally important, to ensure that the time you [invest in networking](#) does not go to waste. “Develop a spreadsheet or database to track all your contacts, including all their contact information,” LaBombard says. “This is an absolutely critical step, which is often overlooked. Use this database to follow-up as necessary with your contacts via email or telephone.”

**Use finishing touches.** Whether or not a networking contact becomes a valuable connection in your future may depend on what you do after your meeting. If you come away from networking without determining next steps, you may have lost a valuable opportunity. “If the person you are talking to is the hiring manager, get his or her business card and agree on follow-up,” LaBombard says. “A logical next step might be to [forward your résumé](#) and ask for a time to interview.”

And don’t forget the power of sending a simple thank-you note to people, to help stand out from the crowd of young job seekers. LaBombard suggests that taking the time to write a handwritten note may trigger a referral to someone else the contact knows who may be hiring.

Last but not least, remember the true purpose of networking is to expand your contacts for future opportunities – not to request a position from each person you meet. “Don’t ask your new

connections for a job.” says John Ricco, co-founder of the executive search firm The Atlantic Group. “Your primary goal in networking is to continue to grow your network.”

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