What Is Networking?

Networking is the process of making connections and building relationships that provide you with information, advice, and further contacts, all of which will enhance your ability to make informed career decisions and tap into unadvertised internship/job vacancies. These relationships have the potential to be mutually beneficial, especially in the long term. Networking can take place in a group or one-on-one setting.

The most important thing to remember as you start to network is to be genuinely curious about the person, and to approach it as a way to learn and get advice from a more experienced professional. Always make sure to express appreciation to those who are helping you, whether for a quick conversation, an introduction to a new contact, or referral for a job.

CCE offers networking tutorials, receptions, alumni panels, career fairs, employer information sessions, site visits, online tipsheets, and networking preparation workshops throughout the year. Other ways to build or expand your network include joining a student club or professional association, volunteering, and talking to professors, family members and friends about who they might know in your fields of interest.

...The most important thing that I have learned is that a huge part of being successful, and more importantly, enriching your life, is fostering relationships with good people.

– Samantha Seto
CU In Program Participant

What Is Informational Interviewing?

Informational interviewing is gathering career information by asking questions of people working in industries, organizations, and positions of interest to you in brief meetings that you initiate.

Informational Interviewing Includes the Following:

• Approaching and contacting people you know or want to meet to gather information about career paths, industries, organizations, and/or potential opportunities.
• Building relationships with individuals who can help the progress of your career exploration, decision making, and job/internship search.
• Asking individuals with whom you initially connect for additional relevant contacts in order to expand your network.

Why Does Networking and Informational Interviewing Work?

Networking and informational interviewing work because they are driven by your initiative and give you an opportunity to show your genuine interest in an industry. Although there are many ways to find information about careers, jobs, and internships, speaking with people in your field of interest provides you with opportunities to engage in substantive dialogue. Networking and informational interviewing put you in touch with individuals who can give you “insider information” on an industry or organizational culture, required skills, possible openings, and more. Additionally, people generally like to help other people, and give back, as someone most likely helped them get to where they are today too. Informational interviewing lets people share expertise that they have built up over a number of years, which is usually a very positive experience for both parties.
Finding People to Connect With

You’re not calling to ask them for jobs, you’re calling to gain a better insight to what you’re trying to do. My goal was not to ask for an interview, but it was to gain a better insight into the world of commercial real estate. However, when he offered to bring me in for an interview it was certainly a big bonus.

– James Jelinek, SEAS 2013

Your Current Contacts

First, consider all the people you know and the people they might know as part of your existing network. Your immediate network can include:

- Relatives
- Friends
- Parents’ friends
- Friends’ parents
- Professors, former teachers, and advisers
- Neighbors
- Current and former employers
- Classmates and club/organization members
- Alumni

There are a number of ways you can ask for support from those who already know you. Even if your direct contacts do not work directly in the field you want to pursue, you never know who they might know or how they might be able to help. Do talk with or email people in your own network about your career interests, and always ask whether they might know someone doing this type of work that you could reach out to for career advice. Remember, you’re only asking for introductions to new people, not a job! As long as you go about the process respectfully and professionally, this can be one of the best ways to get connected to people doing things you find interesting. Your contacts might be willing to connect you via email or even reach out on your behalf to get a conversation going with someone they know in your field of interest. Remember, if you’re being referred, the person who is referring you has put their own reputation on the line. Make sure you prepare, follow through on all referrals given to you, and take the process seriously.

Columbia Alumni

Alumni can often be very helpful contacts for current students and other alumni. Many alumni feel a strong association with their alma mater and would be happy to speak with you for advice. You can reach out to an alum for an informational interview, or meet one at a special event.

Tips for finding alumni:
- Create a profile on LinkedIn (see pages 73 and 74). You can also join groups like Columbia Career Connections (CCC), Columbia Alumni Association, and IvyLife and search the alumni portal at linkedin.com/alumni. When you’re a member of a group, you can reach out directly to group members to request an informational interview or ask a question (see page 72).
- In addition to student groups and other departments on campus, CCE hosts events and panels throughout the year to connect you directly with alumni. Check out CCE’s “Connect with Alumni” webpage and Calendar of Events. Join student groups in your areas of interest to stay informed of events and resources they offer for connecting with alumni. Also regularly check the University-wide calendar of events.
- Some schools and departments within the University have additional resources for connecting with their specific alumni. For instance, the Mechanical Engineering department has a database of alumni who are willing to speak with current students for advice. Check websites and speak to departmental contacts for more information.
- Alumni often attend employer information sessions and career fairs on campus to represent their current companies. This is a great chance to make a first connection.
- CCE’s programs—like STEP, CEO, CEE, CCASSIP, and CUIn—offer participants direct connections to alumni mentors. See CCE’s web site under “Find a Job or Internship” to learn more.
- If you are an alum, you can use the University-wide alumni directory through the Alumni Association website.
Additional Techniques

You can make contact with individuals who you are interested in meeting, but to whom you might not have a direct connection. Do you want to break into the production of TV documentaries? Note the names of editors and researchers shown at the end of your favorite documentaries. After seeing if there are any connections through your own immediate network or Columbia network, email them directly, try contacting them through their production companies, or send a message through Twitter.

LinkedIn Groups

Outside of Columbia-focused groups, there are thousands of groups on LinkedIn bringing together professionals in various industries. Not sure which ones to join? Start by doing a broad key word search under groups, and also looking up people that work at places you find interesting, to see what groups they’re part of. If you’re part of the same group as someone you want to outreach to, you can message them directly.

MentorNet

Columbia University is a member of the award-winning e-mentoring network, MentorNet (mentornet.net), for students interested in engineering, science, mathematics, and technology. This resource connects students to professionals in industry, government, and higher education.

Professional Associations (Columbia and External Chapters) and Student Clubs

There is a professional association for almost every career field. Student (often discounted) and professional membership benefits include opportunities to participate in conferences and networking events; access to the latest industry information, job boards, membership databases, and listservs. Some professional associations have a student chapter on campus, like the Society of Hispanic Engineers or Society of Women Engineers. Other types of Columbia pre-professional student clubs also provide information and opportunities to engage with professionals in the targeted field through site visits, panel presentations, networking events, and conferences. A list of professional associations (Columbia Chapters) and student clubs is available at columbia.edu/students/org_gov_az.html. The American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) offers an online “Gateway to Associations Directory” which takes you directly to many of the associations currently operating nationally and internationally.

Meetup.com

Meetup.com is the world’s largest network of local groups. The site makes it easy for anyone to organize a local group or find one of the thousands already meeting up face-to-face. More than 9,000 groups get together in local communities each day, each one with the goal of improving themselves or their communities. Search Career and Business Meetups for events of interest to you in your area.

Volunteering

Volunteering on or off campus is a great way to build your experience and your network. Volunteering typically brings together groups of people from all different backgrounds, fields, and experiences, so your network grows while you give back. One way you can find opportunities on campus is by connecting to Columbia Community Impact. More than 950 Community Impact volunteers operate 25 programs serving more than 8,000 people each year. Off campus, New York Cares, NYC.gov (search Health and Human Services and see the Volunteer link), or Idealist.org can help to connect you to opportunities.
Getting Started and Preparing for Informational Interviewing

An informational interview is a 20–30 minute meeting, either in person (ideally) or by phone, where you have the opportunity to ask well-researched questions and start to build a relationship with a new contact. Because the primary purpose of informational interviewing is to gather information, you should never approach this activity as “getting a job” but rather as career research. Research leads to information, which leads to hearing about vacancies.

• Develop a strategy before you begin to network. Start with a clear idea of your industry or career areas of interest. Identify the type of information you wish to obtain, and the best people to obtain it from.
• Create a list of potential contacts and an organized way of tracking communication with them. To expand your list of potential contacts, follow blogs and Twitter feeds, join professional associations, listservs, and online groups through LinkedIn and MentorNet.
• Approach contacts—either in person, via email, or phone—for informational interviews. See guidelines below and sample outreach on page 79.
• Do not take it personally if people cannot or do not help you. If you do not hear back right away, do not “harass” the contact. If two weeks pass from your initial contact with no response, you can follow up on your request via email or phone.
• Be confident! Networking and informational interviewing are respected means of career exploration and the search for opportunities. It is likely that your contact has networked in the past and will applaud your initiative.

Sample Request for an Informational Interview

Your initial email should be brief and contain the following information:

• How you found him/her (alumni network, referral, online research, etc.).
• Your school, area of study, and expected year of graduation.
• Your current status (career exploration, industry research, job search, etc.).
• What you are asking them for (information about their organization, industry tips, job search techniques, etc.).
• How you would like to gain that information (an in-person informational interview, a phone meeting—at their convenience).
• How and when you will follow up (allow two weeks before doing so).

Prepping for, Conducting, and Following up on the Informational Interview

• Know as much as you can about the industry and organization before your informational interview. This is an opportunity to ask questions you cannot answer online and to show interest through your research.
• Know as much as you can about your contact and his/her position in the organization before the interaction takes place. Google the contact and check his/her profile on LinkedIn.
• Be prepared to talk about yourself with a brief introduction that shares your educational information, key involvements/experiences on- and off-campus, and career areas of interest. See our online tipsheet on developing a 30-second introduction.
• Before the meeting, devise a list of 8–10 questions and prioritize them, knowing you might only get to a few.
• Dress neatly/professionally (appropriate for industry) and bring along extra copies of your resume, in case it comes up in conversation. Asking for feedback on your resume is an appropriate part of an interaction. You can also offer to send along a copy of your resume prior to the meeting.
• Know where you’re going, and arrive 10 minutes early to the meeting.
• Always ask your contact if he/she can recommend other individuals with whom to speak before ending the interview. If the individual puts you in touch with other people, and you have a successful exchange, be sure to let the original contact know.
• Always ask if there’s anything you can do for the contact.
• Send a thank-you note after every exchange (see page 46 for an example), and maintain the relationship by initiating contact every few months to report progress, or to share information in which they might be interested (e.g., an article or upcoming event). Make the development of a relationship, rather than getting a job, your primary goal.
Sample Questions for Networking

When networking or informational interviewing, ask open-ended questions that encourage description and dialogue as opposed to closed questions, which can be met with a one-word answer or, for example, “Tell me about your current position” is a better question than “Do you enjoy your current job?”

Tasks and Responsibilities

• Please tell me about your work.
• Describe a typical work day.
• What aspect of your job do you find most challenging/rewarding?
• Do you more often work individually or as part of a team?
• Can you describe the typical work/life balance in this field?

Preparation for Career Path

• What do you think is the best educational preparation for this profession?
• How did you become interested in and experienced in this field?
• What are the qualifications you look for in a new hire?
• What else should I know to make an informed decision about choosing a career in this field?
• Is there anything you wished you knew before entering this field? If you were not working in this field, what else might you be doing?
• Do you have any recommendations for other people I should speak with in the field to learn more? May I use your name when reaching out to him or her?

Industry Knowledge

• I read ______ every week. What else would you recommend to help me keep informed of developments in this sector?
• Is the advice you have passed on to me regarding ______ typical of the industry in general, or your particular organization?
• Are there any professional associations that you are part of or suggest I join?
• Where do you see this industry going in the next 5 years? 10 years?

I find as I move through my career that what has in many ways been most valuable are the personal and professional contacts I’ve managed to amass along the way. I’ve heard about countless opportunities through these informal channels and I encourage my students to keep their ears perked for them, and to be on their best behavior since they’ll never know where that person will be down the line!

— Nina Tandon, GSAS 2009

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a tool for researching career fields and companies, building and engaging with a professional network, and finding opportunities. Here, we focus on using LinkedIn as a research tool and to connect with Columbia alumni and other professionals. First, use the checklist and sample on the following pages to develop your profile. Attend a LinkedIn Lab/LinkedIn Power Half Hour (see CCE calendar), set up a meeting to have your profile reviewed, or view a LinkedIn webinar on our website’s multimedia page to learn more.

Research

• Identify potential employers through the Companies tab by searching for organizations in specific industries, geographic locations, or other criteria. This will generate a list of companies meeting your specifications and will also indicate whether anyone in your network is connected to that organization, or if the company currently has any job postings.
• Use the alumni portal (LinkedIn.com/alumni) to find alumni in various industries, companies, or cities, and view their profiles to learn about their career paths.

Connect

• Start by connecting with people in your immediate network: friends, family, classmates, professors, supervisors, and colleagues. Then, use the Advanced Search tool to find professionals in career fields or companies of interest to you—results will be sorted in order of closest connection. If you have a connection in common with an individual, he/she will appear at the top of your list. Use the “get introduced” tool to request that your connection introduce you to the professional with which you wish to engage. You might want to reach out to that person for an informational interview—we will share more about this process next.

• Join groups for your academic departments, industries of interest, alumni affiliations, or personal interests. Columbia-specific alumni groups include Columbia Alumni Association Network and Columbia Career Connections. Once you join a group you will have access to its membership list, which allows you to search for alumni and professionals in your career fields, target companies, or location. You can then send messages to members of that group, so try reaching out to request an informational interview. If you are knowledgeable in the group’s subject matter, you can post questions or responses to discussion items. You may also wish to post a request for career advice, but be specific about what you’re looking for. For instance, an alumna recently posted the following: “Do you know anyone who works for an international or US-based NGO in the field of disaster response/emergency preparedness? I’m changing careers and would like to do an informational interview. Thanks!” Multiple alumni responded with referrals. Note that this individual wasn’t asking for a job—she was just asking for an introduction.

Request Informational Interviews

• Once you’re comfortable using the Advanced Search tool and alumni portal (LinkedIn.com/alumni) to identify professionals and alumni and have reviewed their profiles, try reaching out to set up informational interviews. As discussed in the previous section, informational interviews are a great way to learn more about a company or industry and about the experiences and skills that are necessary to succeed in a field. Start by reviewing pages 67–71 to understand the informational interviewing process and etiquette. When viewing the profile of a person you’d like to speak with, you can click the “connect” button and write your request in the space provided. You can view a sample request for an informational interview on page 79, but keep in mind that when sending a connection request you are limited to 299 characters (with spaces), so your message will likely need to be much shorter. For example, you might say something like:

“Dear Mr. Coleman, I am a senior urban studies major at Columbia and am interested in working in international development. I would love to learn more about your career path and experience with the Council on Foreign Relations. Would you be willing to talk on the phone or in person?”

Not everyone will respond to your requests, but the ones who do will likely be very happy to help you and provide advice, referrals, or other contacts.

TIP: Never use the standard connection request, always personalize your messages to those you wish to connect with. Try sharing why you’d like to connect, or reminding them of how you met if they’re not close connections.