

# BUILDING A PROFESSIONAL NETWORK

*A Harvard Extension School Resource*

**MIGNONE CENTER FOR CAREER SUCCESS**

**Harvard University | Faculty of Arts and Sciences**

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**CAREER AND ACADEMIC RESOURCE CENTER**

**Harvard University | Faculty of Arts and Sciences**

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08/23

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## START NOW

A network of professional connections will help you:

- Explore career options and interests
- Identify resources for informational meetings
- Obtain information about organizations for which you might want to work
- Get career advice about how you might prepare yourself for a certain field or position
- Discover potential job or internship opportunities

**Meeting people in fields of interest is the single  
MOST EFFECTIVE method of finding a job or internship!**

## THE BASICS

**You need just a few things to get started building your network:**

- an idea of what you want at this point in your career exploration or job search
- a brief personal introduction
- a system to manage contacts (for example an Excel spreadsheet or Google Doc)
- an interest in learning and an openness to meeting new people
- a few questions to get the conversation going

**Interact with people who are working in areas related to your interests:**

- Get referrals from other people in your network; you never know who knows who!
- Find people via social media, including professional networking sites such as LinkedIn. Add Harvard Extension School to the Education section of your LinkedIn profile and use the [Alumni tab of school LinkedIn pages](#) to find people who have taken classes there who may be willing to speak with you.
- Meet with Harvard alumni and alumni from other institutions you have attended.
  - Firsthand Advisors ([careerservices.fas.harvard.edu/resources/firsthand](https://careerservices.fas.harvard.edu/resources/firsthand)) is available to admitted degree program students to find Harvard alumni willing to conduct career conversations or mock interviews, or to review resumes.
  - The Harvard Alumni Association alumni database is available to Harvard Extension degree program graduates after graduation, via the Harvard Alumni Association website: [alumni.harvard.edu/haa](https://alumni.harvard.edu/haa).
- Talk to academic departments.
- Attend professional organization meetings.
- Join networking and meetup groups.
- Get involved with community organizations; do volunteer work.

**Start simply: Set a goal to meet one new person whenever you attend an event!**

## ETIQUETTE and GUIDELINES

- Always be **professional, courteous, and considerate**.
- Be **genuine**. Possess a sincere desire to learn. Be honest in asking for advice.
- Be **interested** in the people you meet. Most people enjoy the chance to tell curious people about their own careers and activities.
- **Give back**. Know enough about the people you have met with to keep their needs in mind as you connect to others. You may be able to pass on ideas, articles, and contacts that will interest them.
- Be well **prepared** for each conversation. When you ask for advice or help, and you know what you're looking for, it's easy for people to say "yes." Develop a list of questions ahead of time.
- **Don't explicitly ask for a job**. Let the contact decide if he or she is willing to pass on job leads to you. But do ask for advice on how to obtain jobs in that field.
- Do **ask for names** of other people in the field who you might speak to for more information.
- Find a **connection** to make introductions easier. Look for Harvard alumni through Firsthand, on the Harvard Alumni Association's alumni database (for alumni use), or LinkedIn.
- **Trust** that building a professional network will ultimately result in job leads.
- Be **gracious**. Appreciate the time and effort of your contacts and send a **thank-you note**.
- **Stay in touch**. Check in periodically. Update people in your network when you make significant progress in your research or job search.

## WHAT IS AN INFORMATIONAL MEETING?

In an informational meeting you speak with a professional, typically employed in your field or role of interest, to gather career-related information and advice and to add to your professional network. It is NOT a job-seeking meeting. Instead, you're seeking to gather information, advice and referrals (to other people or organizations) ask questions like:

- Can you tell me about your current role and your path to get here?
- Is there a typical career path in this field?
- What other organizations would you recommend I investigate that are doing great work in this field? Would you be able to suggest someone I should speak to there?
- Based on my background and skillset, would I be a fit for this career, or are there additional skills or expertise I should acquire before looking to make this transition?
- If I decide to pursue this path, how would you recommend I approach the search?
- What would you do differently if you were to do it again?

## A Mutually Beneficial Process

Building a network doesn't come naturally to everyone. There are a variety of reasons people use to rationalize why they don't need to (or can't) build their professional network as they explore career options, search for a job, or develop their careers. One common misperception holding people back is: I'd probably be wasting their time! Why would they want to talk with ME?

## **The Benefits of Informational Meetings:**

### **BENEFITS FOR YOU**

- Get insider advice on entering a field; learn whether specific skillsets, experience or credentials are necessary.
- Gain an impression of the work environment.
- Learn about current trends and vocabulary used in the field.
- Have a professional in the field critique your resume.
- Practice presenting yourself in a low-stress situation.
- Ask questions that would generally be considered too direct in a job interview.
- Gain visibility in the field.
- Expand your network of contacts – maybe even develop a mentor.
- Build confidence in yourself and your decision to move into the field. – OR –
- Learn that this field is not for you.
- Refine your career options, generate others.
- Develop and maintain relationships that may help you in your job search and professional development.

### **BENEFITS FOR THEM**

- Get to share information about their job and career path.
- Pass along wisdom and advice.
- Give back – they likely got started the same way.
- Recognize you are a potential new colleague – a professional contact for THEM.
- May gain valuable information, resources, or contacts from you (now or in the future).
- Increase understanding of what potential employees in your demographic are interested in or looking for.
- Strengthen professional relationships with colleagues, e.g. by referring you to a colleague who eventually hires you.
- All with minimal time

Allows them to assess your:

- Personal/professional chemistry
- Initiative (sometimes, the only way in!)
- Communication skills

## **HOW DO I GET STARTED?**

### **A. Who Should I Contact?**

Create a list of potential contacts within your fields of interest. Look for people doing a job you'd like to do, in a field you'd like to investigate, or working for a company that interests you. Contacts can be people you already know through a job, educational experience, or community activity, or people you have never met. **Obtain names of new contacts through:**

- **People you already know.** Career advisors, fellow students, friends, relatives, faculty, past and present work associates, or supervisors may be able to refer you to professionals in a

variety of fields. Don't be afraid to tell people what you're looking for—you never know who has a great connection. Utilize your LinkedIn network.

- **Alumni/ae Contacts.** Alums have a common bond and often find it quite gratifying to be able to provide assistance to those following in their footsteps.
  - Firsthand: [careerservices.fas.harvard.edu/resources/firsthand](https://careerservices.fas.harvard.edu/resources/firsthand) (available to matriculated degree program students) connects current students with Harvard alumni who have volunteered to conduct career conversations, resume reviews or mock interviews.
  - Harvard's alumni database [alumni.harvard.edu/haa](https://alumni.harvard.edu/haa) (available to HES degree program alumni/ae) houses the contact information for alumni who have indicated that they're willing to speak with others about their career paths.
  - Also see the Alumni tab on the LinkedIn pages for the schools you have attended.
- **Industry directories and trade associations** can help you identify organizations that may interest you. Contacts within these organizations may be professionals in positions that you are interested in learning more about or managers of departments you might enjoy working in. Avoid human resource departments for this purpose (unless you're considering jobs in human resources!) since you're seeking information, not a job. Call the main number, visit their website, or use LinkedIn to secure the names/titles of appropriate individuals.
- **Databases**, such as Leadership Connect, Lexis/Nexis and Factiva (available via <https://databases.hollis.harvard.edu/>), are helpful for searching trade journals for mentions of organizations, key people, trends, and events in different fields, or for finding company contact information.

## B. How Should I Prepare?

**Research:** Read career literature, trade publications, company information, and biographical information. Find out as much about the individual, the organization, and career field as possible before you meet. It's better to use your expert contact as a resource for specific information and advice, rather than the basics. Information directly from your contact's employer's website is a great place to start.

**Questions:** Think about what you hope to learn, and develop questions that will elicit that- whether it be information, advice, or referrals to other people or organizations. Write a list before you begin to help you prepare.

Questions you may want to ask include:

- **A detailed description of the job:** What challenges, rewards, or frustrations have you encountered? How do you typically spend your time on the job? What kinds of decisions do you make? What does a typical day look like? Where does this position or division fit within the larger organization?
- **Desirable skills, education, and experience:** What training or experience is required? What did you do in preparation for entering the field, and what would you do now if you were currently exploring the space? What courses could I take, skills should I possess, or experience might be valuable to me if I decide to enter the field?

- **Career paths and advancement:** What are your career goals? What kinds of opportunities do you see this job preparing you for? Where do people in this field normally move on to next?

Other important areas of discussion might include:

- **Lifestyle implications of the work:** e.g. travel, hours, pressure, flexibility, salary/benefits, family policy, security, etc. It's acceptable (and recommended) to ask about what range of salary you might expect upon entering at a specific level. Do NOT ask how much money the contact makes personally.
- **Work environment:** physical setting, people (colleagues and clients), organizational structure and culture—How does this job fit into the department's/ organization's structure? How does this department work with other departments, and which ones?
- **Current issues in the "industry"** (beyond what you've read): What trends or changes are occurring in your field? Have these changes affected pathways into the industry? If so, in what ways? What companies do they feel are doing great work in this space?
- **Ways to get more information and add to your network:** Ask how they stay up to date on the industry. What journals, professional organizations, names of additional contacts, sites or newsletters that share job opportunities in the industry would they recommend?

Be sure to avoid questions that can be answered "Yes" or "No." Open-ended questions (particularly "What" and "How" questions) will allow your contact to respond with the most useful information and advice.

### C. How Should I Go About Obtaining a Meeting?

Start with your least intimidating contacts first. **Write an email, message on LinkedIn or call:** Call first if they have specified that they would like to be contacted by phone. Write first if you think the contact would appreciate having a brief introduction and a sense of what you're exploring. (See the sample introductory email.) Remember, even when writing, it's preferable to schedule a personal conversation either by phone, a virtual meeting platform or in person to get the most out of the conversation. Experiment and decide what works best for you.

Explain what you want (NOT a job, just information), let them know (or remind them) how you found their name, suggest a time frame (a particular week?) a particular place (preferably their workplace) or video format (such as Zoom), and suggest a limited amount of time (perhaps 30 minutes). Be prepared to settle graciously for an over-the-phone meeting if it's the only alternative. However, if a phone meeting is suggested, it's worth asking if Zoom or other online meeting tools might be an option.

#### Sample phone introduction:

"Hello Ms. Smith, my name is Emilio Sanchez, and I'm a Master's student in Journalism at Harvard Extension School. I got your name from LinkedIn. I understand that you are a writer with *The New York Times*. I'd love to hear more about your career path, and was wondering if you would be willing to set up a time to share your experience with me in a brief meeting."

**Note:** If you call and get voicemail, briefly introduce yourself and explain your interest in wanting to connect. Say you'll try calling back, but also leave both a phone number and email address where you may be reached. Follow up by email, referencing the phone message.

## Sample Introductory Email

This email message is to request an informational meeting to learn more about an alumna's experience as a book editor. The note is careful to avoid asking for a job, or for anything other than the chance to listen and ask questions. The email includes a brief "elevator speech" that summarizes the student's interests.

Dear Erica Jones:

I found your name through the Harvard Extension School LinkedIn page and am writing to ask your advice about the field of publishing. I studied English at Harvard Extension School and will be graduating with a Bachelor of Liberal Arts in May 202X.

Book publishing is a career option that I have considered for some time. I am currently a writer for *Arts Today* magazine and also sit on the editorial board. Prior to attending Harvard, I contributed to a local weekly as a movie critic. I am eager to learn more about the field of book publishing from your experience on the inside, to determine if a transition into that side of the industry would make sense as a next step.

I will be in New York the week of October 9th and would greatly appreciate the chance to speak with you about your experience. If meeting with you at that time is not convenient, perhaps we could talk by phone or Zoom at another time.

Please let me know if there are any particular dates/times that work best with your schedule.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

YOUR NAME

**Note:** Don't be afraid to follow up if you don't hear back from your contact within a week or so. Change the way you are contacting them. If you emailed the first time, try following up by phone or LinkedIn. People are busy, and you will likely not be a top priority. **But this does not mean they are not willing to speak with you.** Persistence is important, and people often appreciate the reminder that they haven't returned your call, and that you are still interested in speaking with them. However, know that you won't have a 100% response rate and be aware of the tone of your follow-up,. Don't take lack of response as rejection—but as an indication of how demanding their job may be on their time. Consider asking if there might be someone else on their team they would suggest you speak with. If you have not heard back after the initial outreach plus two follow-ups, focus your attention on other contacts from your list.

Also, do not attach a resume to an initial introductory email. Not only can attachments increase the likelihood that your message will go into spam, but you want to focus on the meeting as information gathering first-and-foremost. Not asking for a job.



## D. Keep Track of Your Networking Contacts

When you're actively building your network for a job or conducting informational meetings, it's **necessary to keep yourself organized!**

Set up a spreadsheet, a relational database, or whatever organization method works best for you. Here's the type of information you should track, and some sample data:

Contact Name: Jim Yong Kim  
Title: Former President  
Organization: World Bank  
Action Step: Send thank-you note [always update with most recent action step needed]  
To-do by: September 19  
Referral Source: Organization website  
Website: [www.worldbank.org/](http://www.worldbank.org/)  
Email: [info@worldbank.org](mailto:info@worldbank.org) [preferably Jim Yong Kim's direct email]  
Phone: 202-123-4567

### Contact History:

	Contact 1	Contact 2	Contact 3
Date:	Sept. 1	Sept. 10	Sept. 14
Type:	email	phone, voice mail	On-site info mtg
Notes:	introduced self Requested info mtg	polite reminder req'd info mtg	copious notes on entire visit!
Follow-ups:	phone	return call; set date	Thank you note
Status:	DONE	DONE	TO-DO by Sept. 19

Referred to: Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Warren Buffet  
[make entries for all these, using Jim Yong Kim as Referral Source]

## **Do's and Don'ts of the Informational Meeting Process**

**Do** act as professionally as you would for any meeting: email to confirm a day or so ahead, dress appropriately, arrive a little early so you can experience the work environment and relax before your appointment if in person. For phone and video meetings, ensure that you have a quiet space and that your technology is working and the surrounding environment is appropriate, if you will be on camera.

**Do** bring a list of questions with you as a means of guiding the conversation, and note any suggestions or referrals during the meeting, being sure to clarify any terms you don't know or anything you don't understand. Questions to gather information, advice and referrals other people to speak with are key. Be sure to update these notes with what you have learned immediately after the meeting. Afterwards, let the contact know when you follow up on the steps they recommend.

**Do** respect your host's time. Stick to the time frame suggested in your email or phone conversation unless you're invited to stay longer. Be sensitive to nonverbal clues that it's time to end the meeting.

**Do** bring a copy of your resume along to the meeting if in person (just as reference to you and your background, not trying to obtain a job). You do not need to send a resume in advance of the meeting, unless requested by the contact, since this is an informational career conversation.

**Do** consider asking the contact if they would be willing to provide any feedback on your resume, if there is time in the session and it feels appropriate (they may ask you to send it along later, depending on their timeframe). Ask for advice on how to best present yourself, what skills may need refining, which areas need attention or development to best qualify you for that field if you decide to pursue that direction. Also, be sure to ask for advice or other experience/knowledge needed for the field.

**Do** offer to pay if you've gone out for lunch or coffee for your meeting. But you may accept graciously if they insist on paying.

**Do** ask about compensation in a general way, but **Don't** ask about the advisor's personal income package. You might say, "If I were to enter this field in a related role, what salary and other forms of compensation might I expect?" Inquiring with individuals in the field, coupled with salary research on the web, will prepare you well for negotiating in the future.

**Don't** ask your contact for a job, even indirectly. That's not what you are there for.

**Do** open doors to additional contacts by asking "Are there other people you think I should meet as I continue to investigate this field?" Or, ask about potential people to speak with at organizations or in departments that come up in the course of the conversation.

**Do** keep your contact network informed of your career development progress. Maintaining professional contacts is an ongoing process that will benefit you throughout your career.

**Do** email a timely thank you note expressing your appreciation for their time. This is important regardless of how helpful you perceive the conversation to be.

**Don't** speak with only one or two people and assume their views are representative of the field. Continue to develop your network!

**Do** follow up with contacts you receive as well as with professional organizations or other resources you are referred to, and let your referring contacts know that you have done so.

### **Developing your “Elevator Pitch”**

Over the course of your job search, it will be critically important to communicate to people who you are and what it is you're looking for in a position. An “elevator pitch” serves as a professional introduction when speaking with people about your interests, related background or skillset. You may have a 15-second version to use at a job fair, a 30-second version for a networking event, and a 60-90-second one for kicking off an informational meeting. Below are some ways to start thinking about what you'll say:

- What are your current work roles?
- What is the career interest that you are looking to explore further, and how has that developed?
- What skills and experience have you developed that may be applicable to this field?  
What is it that you want to know from someone in this field?

Remember that you won't have just one elevator pitch. Develop your basic introduction, then alter it to be appropriate for different audiences and situations. PRACTICE delivering your introduction to friends (and to yourself). Once you feel comfortable and natural, having the most important elements of your message in mind, it will be much easier to adapt your initial presentation to your audience.

Remember: With a **concise, articulate, and relevant introduction**, delivered with confidence, eye contact, and a smile, you will make a **GREAT FIRST IMPRESSION**.