



# Networking

Is it really all about who you know? Yes.

## In this chapter you will:

- Examine the role of community in networking and think about ways to strengthen involvement in your preexisting groups.
- Consider both strong and weak links in your life and how they can help you network.
- Explore informal and formal networking and how to better engage in each.
- Develop your “elevator pitch” in order to quickly and concisely convey your networking needs.
- Discover how to request and conduct an informational interview.
- Learn how to follow up with your networking leads.

## Building relationships

While the word “networking” might conjure images of people in suits making agonizing, self-promoting small talk, it is something that you have done countless times (even if you’ve never owned a suit). Instead of a forced conversation or the exchange of business cards, think of networking as building relationships. Does this sound more like something you’ve done before?

The value of a strong social and professional network is impossible to overestimate. Nurturing new contacts, making your professional and social needs known, and connecting colleagues with the people who can help them (networking is about reciprocity)—all of these can lead to a positive career transition for you. Your preparations for starting work in a new sector should be about leveraging relationships to make your transition successful.

A strong network helps you to:

- Gain access to information and job leads
- Find and pass along opportunities
- Connect your work and ideas with other people and organizations

### What network? The one you already have.

A mid-career professional often enters the nonprofit world with a strong network in place, while younger people may feel at a loss to locate their networks. Even if you think you do not know anyone in the nonprofit world, chances are that you do simply because of your daily activities. Involvement in religious groups, social clubs, professional organizations, libraries, hospitals, Boy or Girl Scouts, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Campfire USA, local soup kitchens, and schools or colleges, to name just a few, will have already put you in touch with people in the nonprofit world.

## Relying on weak links

In 1973, sociologist Mark Granovetter developed a theory called “The Strength of Weak Ties”<sup>1</sup> that has important implications for job searching and networking. The idea behind the strength of weak ties (which are different from strong ties like family and close friends) is that you have plenty of tangential friends, acquaintances, and other people who pass through your world more than once. These are the people you see a few times a year at friends’ parties, the barista at your favorite cafe, old friends from high school and college that you stay in touch with, or the professor you interviewed for a research paper on urban planning.

The two key advantages that these weak ties have for building relationships and networking are size and awareness. Your weak ties far outnumber your close friends and family. Also, your close social circle will know that you are starting or switching careers, so they will already be on the lookout to help you. If they had job leads, they’d have already given them to you. Your weak ties, once made aware of your situation, can help make connections and open doors that you didn’t even know existed.

Although networking is often viewed as a “business” skill, it is vital to the nonprofit world because of how much weight a personal reference holds. While networking is how many people find their jobs in the for-profit sector, it is even more instrumental in nonprofit job searches. Since much of the work that nonprofits do is driven by a combination of skills and passion, many nonprofit employers prefer to hire a candidate who comes with a personal recommendation. Networking is also a crucial conduit to locating nonprofit positions because of the lack of centralized promotional channels for nonprofit job announcements (see [Chapter Twelve](#) for more on nonprofit hiring practices and the challenges of the job market). And once you’ve been hired, your network will help you to be more effective at doing your job, since much of the work done in nonprofits often involves collaboration and relationship building.

## Your communities, your network

### Start with what and who you know

You can define your communities as any group of people with whom you share common interests, passions, or skills—people with whom you take classes, spend time, or have discussions. Some of these people may be in several of your circles, while you may know others through only one activity or event. The people who populate these groups can be connected to you through both weak and strong ties.

<sup>1</sup> Granovetter, Mark. “The Strength of Weak Ties” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 78, Issue 6, May 1973, pp. 1360-1380.

### Need a babysitter? Did your doctor just retire?

How do you go about finding a new babysitter on a Friday night or a doctor after yours retires? In our personal lives, we rely heavily on the opinions and recommendations of our friends and family. Why then would we ignore our network when we are looking for a job?

You would probably not take the first name of a babysitter or doctor you find in a phonebook without any recommendations or references. So, you can imagine how much more weight a recommended job applicant has over someone whose name is simply one of many in a pile of applicants.



**Many nonprofit employers prefer to hire a candidate who comes with a personal recommendation.”**

Below are examples of different communities of both weak and strong ties. Be aware that you may belong to several communities of one type. For example if you volunteer at an animal shelter and in a kindergarten classroom, you may have two volunteer group communities. This list is by no means exhaustive—you can probably think of several more communities in which you are active.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| • <b>Volunteer groups</b>   | • <b>Classmates from crafts, language, or cooking classes</b> |
| • <b>Colleagues</b>   | • <b>Neighborhood groups</b>                                  |
| • <b>Family and relatives</b>                                       | • <b>Alumni networks</b>                                      |
| • <b>Faith community</b>  | • <b>Fitness class acquaintances</b>                          |
| • <b>Sports teams</b>   | • <b>Online chatrooms</b>                                     |
| • <b>Friends from work, your neighborhood, childhood, or school</b> | • <b>Musical ensembles</b>                                    |
| • <b>Professional associations</b>                                  | • <b>Parenting (or other) support groups</b>                  |
| • <b>Blogger groups</b>   |   |

Being aware of the communities to which you are connected is essential in recognizing the expanse of your network of strong and weak ties. It is also essential in understanding the commonalities of the participants in these groups. Are there certain interest areas that are common to many of the groups? For example, do you have a large number of friends involved in music? Are most of the people you spend time with passionate about volunteering? Did you meet a large number of people through online groups? Are most of the people in your network your age?

While it is important to know the strengths of your network, it is also important to recognize the gaps. The strengths represent your interests, connections to exciting opportunities and contacts, and invaluable information in those areas. The gaps are important to understand because once you've identified areas in which you don't know as many (or perhaps any) people, you can also begin to identify ways to expand your network.

## Keep expanding your community network

In order to continue expanding your network, it is best to again start with your pre-existing communities. This may seem counterintuitive: if you are trying to branch out from your immediate network, why would you want to begin with them?

This goes back to the idea that most people value the opinions of people in their network more than an anonymous suggestion. If you show up at an event, club, or group meeting by yourself, you will undoubtedly meet people and probably make some connections, but you will, in essence, be a “face in the crowd.” You seem nice but no one knows you. You have no one to introduce you and, by doing so, suggest: “This person is okay. You should get to know them.” However, if you attend an event



### TAKING AN ACTIVE ROLE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

What kind of active role can you see yourself taking in your community? Would you like to expand your involvement in an organization that you already work with? Would you like to get involved with a new group in your community and see what active role you can play there? Take a moment to imagine two ways in which you can become more active in your preexisting community groups as well as two interest areas in your life that you would like to further cultivate, rekindle, or explore. This can be anything from playing intramural sports to taking on a leadership role in a faith organization, from starting to paint again to making a point to get out into the wilderness more often.



### DO YOU HAVE TIME FOR ALL OF THIS?

Now that you have thought about your preexisting groups and some new areas that you would like to explore, sit down with a calendar and figure out what kind of realistic time commitments you can make. Your goal here is to find a happy medium between taking a more active role in your community groups (reconnecting with a group that you have lost touch with or taking a leadership role in a familiar group) and finding new community groups to connect with (arts organizations, job seeker support networks, trail maintenance groups at a state park), as well as seeing how much time you really have to pursue these endeavors. Does your work schedule make weekend activities easier to attend than weeknight meetings? Can you volunteer for a new organization once a month? Can you commit to coaching an entire basketball season? Does the meeting time for the watercolor group conflict with another engagement?

with a friend (or a friend-of-a-friend), you will also meet people, but with an added bonus—you'll now have an informal endorsement as the person you accompanied to the event introduces you.

## Take on a leadership role

Step back and examine the distinct groups in your network. For each group, do you see any missed connections, unrealized potential, or areas for improvement? For example, is there a natural connection between your local neighborhood group and the urban renewal nonprofit where you volunteer? Would members of your Spanish language class enjoy the opportunity to volunteer with a local school to tutor English as a Second Language students? Does your college alumni network need a local chapter?

A leadership role is not necessarily synonymous with being the president. There are plenty of opportunities for leadership where you can achieve significant results without taking on the responsibility of being elected or given a title. In these instances, the results can often be quantified and included in your resume, and can also prepare you to be a serious candidate for an “official” leadership position in the future (if you so choose). As with all networking, remember to “build it before you need it.” If you are considering being elected to a position, take on a leadership role well before an election; it will allow your leadership and relationships to evolve naturally.

## Make connections and ask questions

While it is important to clearly and concisely talk about yourself (see [“The elevator pitch” discussion](#) below), it is equally important to find out as much as you can about the people in your community. At events, practice asking questions that allow people to talk about themselves, their career paths, and their interests and passions. Consider these situations to be mini-informational interviews (see page 66 for more on informational interviewing). They are not formal or scheduled, but you can still get an incredible amount of information, advice, and potential referrals from more casual conversations that are framed by the right questions. Find a friend or contact you have heard ask good questions; see if they would be willing to let you shadow them at a party or event. This is one area where a script is a particularly bad idea, as it usually sounds canned—the opposite of your goal. The best way to learn effective questioning skills is to watch others do it and then get out there and practice.

The only question you **SHOULD NOT ASK** is if someone can give you a job. This question puts people on the spot and there are much more effective ways to convey your interest in a position without creating an awkward and potentially negative situation.

### Networking and age

Generally, as you age you develop more contacts and a larger network. Since you are just beginning your career, you are probably also just beginning to establish your network. However, regardless of your age, it is beneficial to expand your network to incorporate people who do not fit your demographic profile, including making a concerted effort to reach out to people who are either older or younger than you. This can be intimidating for anyone. Younger people may be hesitant about contacting someone who is in a leadership position in an organization they are interested in for fear of “wasting their time.” Older people may be hesitant about contacting someone younger because they may not recognize the value a younger person can bring to their network.

The more diverse your network, the more you will have access to varied perspectives, information, and connections. As with all networking, keep in mind that people often enjoy talking about themselves and helping others. These two qualities allow people of all backgrounds and ages to feel flattered that someone is seeking their expertise and valuing their opinion.



### GET ACTIVE!

Once you have an understanding of what community groups you would like to be active (or more active) in, and after you have a realistic sense of how much time and energy you are able to commit, seek out the organizations that interest you. This can be as simple as calling your spiritual leader to ask to lead a study group, approaching an arts nonprofit to see if they have volunteer opportunities for children's art classes on the weekend, or offering to host an alumni football barbeque.

# Informal and formal networking

## Informal networking

This is the kind of networking you've already done quite a bit. You may not have called it "networking," but it's what you were doing when you struck up a conversation with a new person, when you volunteered for an organization, or when you reconnected with an old friend. Some people are more comfortable with this than others, but just by doing what you do every day, you have already accumulated quite a significant network of contacts. Many of the contacts that you have made through informal networking constitute your "weak ties."

Informal networking is a beneficial, long-term form of networking because you aren't looking for anything specific yet. Instead, you're building relationships and letting people get to know you. With this kind of networking, opportunities naturally arise as many people enjoy recommending strong (and close) candidates for professional and personal opportunities.

Say you want to talk with someone who is in the environmental field. Who would you call? Is there someone who could put you in touch with another person who might know more? How about a request for general advice on your resume? Or an opinion on recent political events? Chances are good that you have at least one person you would call for each of those scenarios. And chances are that one of those people would in turn call you for information on a topic about which you have some expertise. This conversational give-and-take is much of what informal networking is about.

### Some examples of **informal networking**:

- Volunteering
- Participating in your faith community
- Posting messages on mailing lists, chat rooms, listservs
- Emailing an old friend (or two) to get back in touch
- Setting up an action group with people in your community
- Inviting friends to join a new book club
- Talking with the person behind you in the grocery store line, on the bus, etc.

## Formal networking

Compared with informal networking, formal networking focuses on professionally beneficial partnerships, ideas, and job leads. Formal, targeted networking is the type that gives networking its bad reputation because of the misconception that it is all



### IT TAKES TIME TO LEAD

If you volunteer to organize an event, lead a

group, or present a workshop, be forewarned that these activities will require significant time and energy. It is not something you should do if you may not have enough time to do it well.

However, if you can prepare for and successfully conduct a workshop or organize an event, this will allow you to have a much more visible presence in your community. It may also allow you to meet people you might not have otherwise met. Look into opportunities to present workshops for clubs, organizations, or even online communities to which you belong. Similarly, there are many opportunities for hosting an event (end of season party, post-yoga class breakfast, or faith group social) for a community in which you're involved. This is an incredibly valuable experience in terms of meeting people and taking on a higher profile in your community. Plus, it looks good on your nonprofit resume.

about schmoozing and fishing for important contacts. Instead, think of formal networking as strategic relationship building. Along with more targeted relationships, formal networking also involves an awareness of, and intentionality about, the process. The people you meet at networking events know that conversations, contacts, and connections are good for relationship building in general, but they are also aware that such networking is very helpful for professional purposes.

Formal networking is also about creating a connection that allows you to pass on resources to those in your network. Everyone has the potential to be a valuable connection because of the relationships, resources, and perspectives they can provide.

Just like informal networking, formal networking can take a wide variety of forms. The main characteristic of formal networking is that it can help you be more strategic about whatever it is you're currently looking for (a job, information, a good pair of shoes, etc.).

#### Examples of **formal networking**:

- Participate in conferences, workshops, presentations for your current job
- Participate in networking events (professional association events, local business publication events, Young NonProfit Professionals, Net Impact, Green Drinks, etc.)
- Email/phone friends, family, and staff at your alma mater regarding their contacts
- Conduct informational interviews
- Join professional associations
- Apply for internships (advertised opportunities as well as internships you've solicited)
- Join online social networking sites (LinkedIn, MySpace, Facebook, etc.)
- Become involved in your alumni networks

## Your formal networking roadmap

Your formal networking efforts will be more effective if you take a strategic, intentional approach. There are three tasks to do before you jump headfirst into a non-profit networking event (like an informational interview, a meeting with an alum, or an online forum):

1. **Research**
2. **Prepare an elevator pitch**
3. **Develop a system**

### Research

In order to get the most out of your networking, make sure to research:

- Basic information about the relevant field, organization, and position
- What you hope to gain from this specific meeting or event

### Natural networkers

Do you know people who seem to know everyone? Think about what they do at parties, sporting events, lunchtime, or even while walking around town. These people probably always have a story about "a new person I met" or "a great conversation I just had." The next time you're with a natural networker, watch how they interact with everyone: their colleagues, their best friends, and acquaintances, strangers, and colleagues. By watching a few of these networkers in action, you'll see that there isn't one particular way to network, but rather a variety of effective styles.

### Formal networking and informational interviews

Informational interviews are a great example of strategic relationship building. The key point of an informational interview is to glean useful knowledge from a professional in the field. One byproduct of an informational interview, therefore, should be adding one more person to your professional network. When done correctly, an informational interview creates a type of mentorship in which you can keep your contact abreast of your successes as you explore your new field. Most people who agree to informational interviews are eager to be "kept in the loop" and will usually enjoy an email or quick phone call letting them know how you are getting along. This follow-up effort is good for keeping you on that person's professional radar. See page 66 for more on informational interviews.

You do not want to ask questions that make it evident you didn't prepare. Be familiar with information about the constituency that an organization serves, the main responsibilities of people in their position, and some of the general concerns that the specific industry faces. If you know some basic information before your conversation, you will make the most of your meeting time by asking thoughtful questions that will help you get what you need out of the meeting. You will also leave an impression of yourself as a knowledgeable, insightful, and prepared person whom your contact will remember and be comfortable recommending when that perfect job opportunity arises. Not adequately preparing yourself may leave a poor impression and undermine your chances of future connections, references, or job leads.

Here are some ideas for research:

***An organization's website:*** This is your best source of information for an organization's mission, constituents, recent grants, annual report, new initiatives, advisory board, and influential people in the organization. Site maps, when available, are a great way to get a sense of what information is available.

***The Nonprofit Times*** and ***The Chronicle of Philanthropy***: Use these publications to search for articles about a particular field, organization, or person as well as getting good, general sector information.

***Career Opportunities in the Nonprofit Sector*** by Jennifer Bobrow Burns (New York: Checkmark, 2006): This book is available in libraries and bookstores and provides a great overview of major nonprofit positions, education requirements, and career trajectories.

***GuideStar:*** GuideStar ([www.guidestar.org](http://www.guidestar.org)) provides a comprehensive listing of nonprofit organizations. You can search for an organization's old 990s (the annual tax report that nonprofits need to file with the IRS) in order to get a sense of their financial status from a few years back.

***General Google search:*** This should be a last stop to catch any information that your more focused searches didn't uncover.

Finally, as much as you should know about the basics of a person's job or their specific organization, you will also need to know what you want to get out of this meeting. This knowledge will help you frame, shape, and articulate your research to make sure your networking endeavors are productive and strategic.



### YOUR PUBLIC PROFILE IS PUBLIC

A word of warning about online

networking programs: be aware potential employers may view anything that you post. While you may not recognize MySpace, Friendster, or Facebook as a business tool, many potential employers do. A good rule to keep in mind is that you should only post information, photos, or opinions that you would like your parents, children, or a current or potential employer to see.

Another tip: Employers often Google applicants, so you should be aware of the links that pop up when your name is "Googled." Do a search for yourself and see what comes up.



### Researching organizations

Further advice on researching organizations is available in the

following chapters of this book:

**Chapter Six** has ideas for researching work opportunities near and far.

**Chapter Seven** explains how to research and evaluate organizational culture, while **Chapter Nine** has tips on researching an organization before your job interview.

**Chapter Ten** includes useful advice on researching an organization's compensation package so you can negotiate more effectively.

All these chapters are available at [www.idealists.org/beginacareer](http://www.idealists.org/beginacareer).

## The elevator pitch

If you were in an elevator actually talking with a potential employer, your normally quick elevator ride would seem even shorter as you tried to convey why you are the perfect candidate for a job. However, if you have prepared and practiced a concise, persuasive statement conveying your best attributes in approximately 30 seconds, then that short ride would be more than enough time to articulate your value.

You will use your elevator pitch for informational interviews, networking events, or chance meetings. No matter where you are, you will want to be able to succinctly state who you are, what you are looking for, and how the person you're speaking with could help you. If done well, 30-45 seconds is plenty of time to convey your need without losing your audience's attention. Always try to be brief. This will leave more time for a conversation with your new contact around ways that you can help one another out.

Here's what you should include in your elevator pitch:

1. **Who are you?**
2. **What you're looking for and why**
3. **A specific outcome**

### 1. Who are you?

*"Hi, my name is Edgar."*

While it may seem obvious, be sure to state your name! State it clearly, slowly, and with confidence. Practice this beforehand several times. This is how the person you're talking with will remember it. If you have business cards, handing one to the person will provide a visual reminder of your name, as well as a means to contact you in the future.

*"I majored in finance at SUNY Binghamton and served as the president of our campus accounting club. Before graduating this past spring, I spent much of my time off campus helping a local organization get their financial records in order."*

After stating your name, mention something else specific that defines you at this point in your life. Are you still in school or have you recently graduated? If so, what was your major and minor? What extracurricular activities did you excel in? What school did you attend? The trick here is to be as specific as you can without boring the listener with unnecessary details.

### 2. What you're looking for and why

Be specific! The bulk of your elevator pitch should explain exactly what you are looking for and why. Have at least a general idea of what you're looking for, whether it is a job, advice, or a referral for someone to contact in a particular organization.



### TWO NETWORKING ACTIVITIES A DAY...

Commit to following up with two networking activities every day. This could mean making a phone call, sending an email, attending an event, researching an organization, conducting an informational interview, writing a thank you note, or closing out a dead end lead. By making a conscious decision to pursue two networking activities a day, you will help ensure that you do not become passive in locating work; a job search should be active.



*“I am interested in applying both my education and my community service experiences to the nonprofit sector. I would ideally like to work in development and fundraising for a larger, local organization that focuses on environmental advocacy.”*

Clearly explaining what you are looking for can be tricky if you have not prepared. Spend the most time practicing this part of your pitch to make sure it is direct, concise, and polished.

### 3. A specific outcome

Do you want an informational interview, online or published resources, or advice? If you know what you want to get out of the conversation, you can find a way to subtly work it in to the end of your elevator pitch and allow the person to offer it. Of course, be aware that a specific request can put the person you’re speaking with on the spot, and if they can’t help you with your exact request, the conversation may end there. Open-ended requests will likely lead to a fruitful conversation.

*“I would love to know if you have any contacts in larger nonprofits who I could speak to regarding my interests. As I continue to explore my career opportunities in the nonprofit sector, I am always looking out for interesting people doing interesting work, as well as any good advice on publications or other resources that I should be familiar with.”*

Open the door for conversation without demanding anything. Often, you will get a response such as, “Oh, I know exactly the person you should talk with. Let me get you their contact information.” This way, you get what you’re looking for while allowing the people you’re speaking with to determine how they can help you.

Here’s how to develop and practice your elevator pitch:

- **Write it out**
- **Practice it out loud**

**Write it out:** You should write your pitch out first and then practice saying it until it feels natural. You can also begin by speaking what you think you want to say and writing it down as you go; once your words are down on paper, you can polish them. Either way, be sure to work on both the spoken and written versions of your pitch. The written version is to make sure that you’re saying exactly what you want to say as you want it to be heard, and can also be useful for email introductions and written requests for informational interviews. The spoken version is what your audience will hear and it is essential that you are able to say a close approximation of the essential details you have on paper (without sounding like you are reciting a list from memory).

### Business cards for beginners

You don’t need to have a job to have a business card! In fact, since they’re basically a pocket-sized marketing tool, they’re great to have during your job search. While you may have a resume that you can hand out, resumes are not easily portable for casual networking events. Another point to consider is that handing out a resume can create an interesting power dynamic. Handing out a resume conveys “I need a job.” Exchanging business cards with someone instead establishes more of a peer relationship and a sense of collaboration.

Your personal business cards should have a simple, clean layout that includes your name, phone number, email address, and possibly your permanent address or website if either are relevant to your search. The address will show you’re local (a plus for many nonprofits) and the website could have your resume and work samples, or serve as an online portfolio. With the huge number of online and inexpensive printing options, it may be worth it to spend the money to print quality business cards (often they are \$20 for 250 cards).

Remember that one of the most valuable reasons to hand out your business cards is that you will get someone else’s in return. Since most folks will not contact you from a first meeting—it’s up to you to use their business card as a way to follow up and contact them!

**Practice it out loud:** Once you've practiced it in front of the mirror and you feel like the wording sounds natural and concise, find some friends or family members who will give you honest feedback on all aspects of the pitch. Ask everyone who listens to provide you with at least one aspect to improve, as well as one aspect that works well. Have your practice audience pay attention to your content, clarity, tone, and pace, as well as to your body language and poise.

## Develop a system

In order to better manage your network, you will need a system to keep track of all of the details that are essential in developing relationships. The process of gathering contacts needs to be supported by some mechanism for organizing this information. If you do not have a detailed and organized system for your contacts, you risk losing track of potential leads, wasting time pursuing information that you should already have, or even worse, confusing contact details and consequently coming across as very unprofessional.

Think about your personal relationships. Do you send family members and friends cards or presents on their birthdays? Perhaps you keep track of the dates on a calendar and store current addresses on your computer. A professional networking system is very similar in that it allows you to store essential information about people you meet so that you can cultivate relationships by keeping track of details. People appreciate the fact that you take the time to learn details about their work, organization, and accomplishments. Tracking details makes sure they know you are paying attention.

There are plenty of networking system styles, but the best ones are easy to use, detail-oriented, and allow you to keep track of ongoing aspects of the relationship. A system can be as simple as a Rolodex, as portable as an address book on your PDA, as connected as an online networking website (for example, [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)), or as customized as an Excel spreadsheet tailored to your needs. The most important part is that you are diligent about using your system, so pick one that will work for you. Ask friends, family, colleagues, instructors, "natural networkers," and career service professionals to describe what systems they use.

Page 65 is a sample sheet that can be printed, copied, and attached to each individual's business card and kept in a three-ring binder or some other alphabetized filing system. You can create a similar document in Word and use a file naming system that helps you keep track of the information. It's not fancy but, if used consistently, it can be an effective way to keep track of your contacts. If you choose to use another format, consider using the prompts from this system to ensure that you include all necessary details.



**"I DON'T KNOW WHAT I WANT TO DO."**

Don't start any network-

ing situation by saying, "I don't know what I want to do."

If you are open to a variety of opportunities, you can still tailor your pitch to each situation. Perhaps you are considering careers in either grantwriting or teaching. You don't have to confess your conflicted thoughts on whether grantwriting or teaching is the ideal career for you; you don't even have to mention it in your pitch. For the purpose of any conversation, your "What are you looking for and why?" component should be tailored to that conversation. Be prepared to answer questions like, "Why are you interested in this career?" or "What relevant work have you done so far?"

You can answer these questions honestly and thoughtfully based on your passion and experience. Your desired outcomes will be clearer and the person you're speaking with will be able to be more specific in their referrals and advice.

Also, bear in mind that if you seem unsure about what you want to do, or likely to make a poor impression, people in your network will be less willing to hand out contact information because you could reflect poorly on them. Nobody wants to gain a reputation for wasting their peers' time.

# Network Management System

Contact name: \_\_\_\_\_

(including Dr, The Honorable, III, etc.)

**Basic information**

Title/Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Org/Company: \_\_\_\_\_

Org URL: \_\_\_\_\_

**Contact information**

**Email addresses**

Work: \_\_\_\_\_

Personal: \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone numbers**

Cell: \_\_\_\_\_

Work: \_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Physical address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**FILE UNDER**

**DATE OF 1<sup>ST</sup> MEETING**

**MEETING DETAILS**

Where did we meet? Include event, place, date. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Who introduced us? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Details from our conversation:  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

This person has knowledge about/experience with/contacts in the following areas:

He/she is okay to approach (circle one in each pair): casually/often or formally/rarely

Date of last meeting	Venue (phone, event, etc.)	Specific details of last interaction	Referred me to these resources (people, sites, articles, etc.)	Any specific outcomes?	Did I follow up? (card/email/call)	Resources/contacts that I've given to them	Down the road: when to contact again, next steps, etc.

# Informational interviews

## Relax. People love to talk about themselves...

One way to learn about your career options is to interview the people who are already following a similar path. An informational interview is usually a very brief (about a half hour) exploratory chat with a person who has insights into a position, educational field, career path, organization, field of expertise, or issue area. It is *not* a job interview, nor is it ever an appropriate time to ask for a job.

In an informational interview, your objective is to gather as much information and advice as possible, and to make contacts in the occupational areas and/or organizations that most interest you.

Informational interviews can serve a variety of functions:

- Provide background on a field of work
- Offer specific information about a type of organization
- Find out about hiring trends (but don't ask for a job)
- Explore a particular organization
- Connect with local decision makers in the nonprofit sector

Think back to the Four Lens Framework (see [Chapter Three](#)) as you begin to map out your informational interview schedule. Try to locate people who:

- Work in the **roles** or **organizations** that interest you.
- Work within a **system** that interests you.
- Work on the **issues** that interest you.

Tap into your network of contacts to help you identify people with whom you should chat. Be sure to get permission from your contacts to use their names in requesting interviews; perhaps ask them send an introductory email before you contact the person in order to “e-introduce” you. Using your network should help make cold-calling or “cold-emailing” potential informational interviewees unnecessary. If your network does not turn up any leads, it’s preferable to cold-email someone rather than cold-call them.

Before you talk with your potential informational interviewee, be prepared and practice what you are going to say. This is your first chance to sound competent, polished, and professional. Remember, and practice again, your elevator pitch. Whether you are emailing or calling to ask for an interview, here are some things you can mention:

- Who referred you to the potential interviewee
- Why you are asking them for an interview (be sure to include any specific, positive aspects about them or their work)



**An informational interview is *not* a job interview, nor is it ever an appropriate time to ask for a job.”**

- What kind of information you are seeking (information about the organization, issue area, job function, etc.)
- A request for a roughly half-hour chat, at a time and place of their choosing or by phone if they are not in your area

Here's an example of what this might sound like:

*Hello. I'm Edgar Hernandez. Kathy Liu suggested I get in touch with you to request an informational interview. I've majored in finance at SUNY Binghamton, where I served as president of the campus accounting club and helped a local charity improve their book-keeping practices. I've been considering a career in nonprofit finance. Kathy said that you have 15 years of experience in fundraising and development and that you are highly respected among your peers. I am sure you are busy, but I was wondering if you would have time for a short conversation over coffee, or at your office; my schedule is flexible. I'd love to ask you some questions about how you got started and the trajectory of your career so far.*

### What if they say no?

It is possible, though usually unlikely, that the person will turn you down for an interview. They may not have the time right now or may not feel that they can actually help you. If they have said that they are too busy right now, follow up by asking if you can contact them again in the future and, if so, when would be a good time. If they say they cannot help you, thank them for their time and ask if they can refer you to another person in a similar role, field, or organization.

### If they say yes...

More than likely, people will be happy to give you a bit of their time. Once you've scheduled the informational interview, prepare yourself well. Your to-do list should include:

- Researching their accomplishments (try Googling them) and their organization online. Working their accomplishments into your conversation ("I saw that you spoke at the Gates Foundation. What was that like?") is a great way to learn information while letting them know you have taken the time to prepare.
- Finding something that the person has written, a speech they've given, or research they've published, and then developing a few questions about it. The more you show you are aware of their work, the more impressed they will be.
- Preparing thoughtful questions ahead of time (see below).
- Dressing professionally (or at least appropriately for the situation).
- Being on time. Be sure to call if you think you are running late.
- Bringing a pad of paper and a pen to take notes, and a watch to keep track of the time.
- Planning to pay for their order if you are meeting for a beverage or a meal.



### USE SOCIAL NETWORK SITES

Are you on Facebook or MySpace every day? Why not

use them to help you network for your job search? Use keywords relating to your interests (like AIDS, environment, or nonprofit) to find others in your extended network who have similar interests, or who are working in related fields. Try a search using the names of organizations you're interested in. In Facebook, once you've searched a keyword, click on "People" to make sure you're searching individual profiles. If you go to a traditional college-age school, set the age limit in the advanced settings to people who are over 22—this should get you alumni. You might start a message to these people by saying something like, "Hi—I know this is a little strange, but I see on your profile that you're working at...". After you acknowledge the awkwardness, most people will be happy to tell you about their experiences. Just be sure to follow up with a prompt and appreciative "thank you."

—Valinda Lee

Below are some questions to consider asking. Choose the most relevant ones for your situation in advance, and remember that your interviewee may be pressed for time. It's unlikely you'll be able to ask all of these questions.

- How did you get started on this career path?
- Why did you choose this type of work—what drew you to it?
- What do you do in a typical day?
- What are the most and least rewarding aspects of this type of work?
- If I were to look for a job in this field (or career path), what are the best known organizations or types of employers I should be aware of?
- How would you recommend I start the job search?
- What other local (regional, national, international) employers have positions in this field?
- What do you wish you had known about this field when you were starting your career? What would you do differently?
- Which skills and abilities are most valued in your field? Which ones are currently in demand?
- How would you recommend someone with my background demonstrate these skills through my resume? (This is a great question to ask if you want them to offer to look over your resume. Don't directly ask them to do this.)
- What is the salary range for this position in this area based on my level of experience?
- Are there peak hiring seasons in this field?
- What is the turnover/burnout rate? Why is it that way?
- What degree(s) do you have? Where did you earn it/them?
- What degree(s) would you recommend someone in this field getting?
- What do you consider the best schools for that kind of degree?
- Are there any books or publications I can read to learn more about this work?
- Who else would you recommend I chat with for more information?
- May I use your name when I contact them?
- What haven't I asked you that I should have?
- May I contact you if necessary, in the future?
- Again, **DO NOT ASK** for a job!

If you are performing a long-distance job search (see [Chapter Six](#)), make sure to ask these questions:

- What are some local nonprofit resources that I should be aware of?
- Is this the kind of career field for which a national search might be conducted?
- Who else would you recommend I chat with for more information?

Before you leave, politely ask for a business card, brochure, and if available, a copy of their organization's latest annual report (make sure the annual report isn't already online). If possible, give them your business card, too.



Use the space below to jot down a few other questions you would like to ask in an informational interview.

## After the interview

After you leave, it is essential to send a thank you note. You can have the thank you note stamped, addressed, and ready to go (except for writing the note itself) when you go to the interview. After you leave the interview, take a few minutes to write the note and pop it in the nearest mailbox. Make the note meaningful, and mention something specific that you learned.

When you get home, jot down some impressions and notes in your networking management system (see pages 64-65). Ask yourself:

- What did I learn?
- How interested am I in exploring this field further?
- What values, skills, and interests of mine fit—or don't fit—with this type of work?
- What are my next steps from here? (Websites/articles to read, people to contact, events to attend, etc.)

If your informational interview leads to any positive professional steps, make sure to contact the person again to thank them. Everyone appreciates follow-up and it makes people much more likely to help you again in the future. It also shows your attention to detail and can be a reminder that you are still searching for work (or a signal that you have found a position).

If the person you interviewed gave you the name of a new person to contact, begin the process again. Over time, you will have created an expanded network of people well-positioned to help you in your career.

## Follow up

Whatever type of networking you do, following up is essential. After any networking event or informational interview, as you are recording details in your networking system, review past contacts and determine if there is anyone with whom you need to follow up. This could mean emailing a new contact that someone gave you or sending a thank you note to someone who provided you with valuable information. Informational interviews are particularly important to follow up with a thank you note.

### Contact the contact

This is extremely important, particularly if you were given a name and contact information. Following up with referrals is vital because the person may have been told to expect your call. Furthermore, if you fail to follow up with a suggested contact, the referrer will be far less likely to give you other leads that could be helpful to you in the future. It is also too good of an opportunity to pass up; if you've got

### Following up on new leads

Remember, if the person you are interviewing has any other contacts that they think can help you, they will probably mention them without you asking. That said, it may be useful to double-check toward the end of the interview if the person has not mentioned anyone to follow up with for future informational interviews.

Ask how to spell the name of any new contacts, and request a phone number and email address. If you feel the conversation is going well and the interviewee is eager to help you out, consider asking if they would be willing to “e-introduce” you to the new contact.



### HAND-WRITTEN NOTES AND CARDS

Should you avoid handwritten notes and cards when sending a thank you message to your informational interviewees? While thank you notes are meant to be a form of professional correspondence, it is possible to add a personal touch. If you left an informational interview feeling like you made a personal connection with the interviewee, a handwritten note may be in order. If the entire informational interview process felt very formal and professional, however, then a handwritten note may not be appropriate.

If you choose to send a typed note, use business letter formatting and keep it to the three-paragraph structure detailed in the interview follow-up discussion of [Chapter Nine](#).

an introduction to talk with someone, take advantage of the opportunity. Even if the person may not seem to be able to offer anything that is directly relevant to what you're looking for at the moment, a key aspect of networking is its cyclical nature. A relationship you develop and cultivate now may be the connection that helps you land a great job several years or decades later. Similarly, a contact that you think may not have any relevant leads for you may surprise you with some great information or resources. You never know when a contact may prove useful or when you, in turn, may be able to help that person out.

## Thank you notes

As you follow up with connections, referrals, or resources, be sure to also follow up with your original contact. Thank you notes are always a good idea. Mention a specific detail from your interaction in your note to remind your contact about your conversation. This type of note will likely leave an impression of you as a thoughtful, detail-oriented person who appreciates and acknowledges people's time and insights. There are few people who wouldn't want to refer such a person to others in their network.



### REMEMBER, NETWORKING IS A TWO-WAY CONNECTION

Networking should be a mutual give-and-take relationship. Neglecting to give back to those who help you can lead to shut doors in the future.

A reciprocal networking arrangement allows you to not only receive advice, references, and opportunities from your contacts, but also to pass on opportunities, articles, or events to your network of contacts. During all of your informal networking, be sure to keep track of your contacts, conversations, and information with a structured system.



## SUMMARY

**Networking**, the building of relationships, is essential to any successful job search in the nonprofit sector. In this section, we explored several key themes that will help you in your networking efforts (page 55).

Your **weak ties** (page 56) are those acquaintances and tangential friends or former coworkers who can help you expand your networking opportunities exponentially. **Strong ties** (page 56) are your close friends and family who have the time and energy to help you network.

Using your preexisting community groups to create new connections and contacts is a key way to network. This kind of **community involvement** means joining groups or exploring new opportunities that can expand your network (pages 56-58).

**Informal networking** is the day-to-day interactions with friends, family, and colleagues that lay the groundwork for future opportunities and reciprocal relationships (page 59).

Targeted, intentional **formal networking** can include assessing your community/informal networking community to find job leads, attending professional networking events, and conducting informational interviews with professionals in your field of interest (pages 59-61).

Your **elevator pitch** should clearly and concisely convey who you are, what you are looking for and why, and a specific desired outcome from your conversation with a potential networking lead (pages 62-63).

To be an effective networker, you need to have a very organized **network management system**. This will ensure that you do not let any opportunities slip through the cracks and that you are making the most efficient use of both your own and your contacts' time (pages 64-65).

**Informational interviews** can reap many rewards, from new contacts to useful knowledge. Prepare a thoughtful range of questions in advance, but **never** ask for a job at an informational interview (pages 66-67)!

**Following up** with network contacts keeps the door open for the future; you will most likely need it again (pages 69-70).

## You are here

- This is **Chapter Four**. The entire book is available free of charge at [www.idealists.org/beginacareer](http://www.idealists.org/beginacareer).

### About Action Without Borders, Idealist.org, and this book

**Action Without Borders** is a nonprofit organization founded in 1995 with offices in the United States and Argentina. **Idealist.org**, a project of Action Without Borders, is an interactive site where people and organizations can exchange resources and ideas, find opportunities and supporters, and turn their good intentions into action.

*The Idealist Guide to Nonprofit Careers for First-time Job Seekers* is a product of Action Without Borders' Nonprofit Careers Program based in Portland, OR. This team works to support individuals and organizations with graduate education options; HR and volunteer management resources; and job, internship, and volunteer opportunities.

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