Simply stated, networking is relationship building. It is the process of making connections with people in order to gather information and expand your knowledge about jobs, internships, career fields, graduate schools, and/or geographical areas. The purpose of a network is to develop a professional support system that can assist you in growing as a professional and, in turn, make it possible for you to encourage other people in the future. It can also assist you in collecting information and resources about the job market and occupations, as well as develop job leads and referrals.

Making contacts with people can help you find jobs, as most employers would rather hire someone they know or someone who was recommended by an acquaintance.

HOW TO BUILD A NETWORK

There are multiple ways to begin building your network:

1. Make a list of all the people you know. This can include relatives, neighbors, previous or current supervisors, faculty, fellow students, etc.
2. Join online professional networking groups – such as LinkedIn, or professional student organizations.
3. Join the College of Charleston Alumni Association group on LinkedIn to connect with CofC alumni in a similar field of interest as you are.
4. Attend career fairs to speak with recruiters from various companies and organizations.

Then, systematically contact these people to ask if they can refer you to someone who works in an occupation of interest to you, or if they can provide you with advice in conducting your job search. Another method to tap the hidden job market is by making “cold calls.” You might contact the local Chamber of Commerce for employer listings or obtain company information from the Career Center on companies where you would like to work.

Before you begin contacting people, decide what type of information you want from the contact, such as: company information; information about the career field; a referral for someone else who may be able to help you; advice on conducting your job search; an opportunity to job shadow; etc.

CONTACTING YOUR CONNECTIONS

In many cases, you will want to set up a brief meeting, or informational interview, with the contact.

To do this, call or write to the individual and say something similar to, “Hello, my name is Laura Scott and (so and so) suggested I speak to you because I am interested in finding out more about the public relations field. Might you have some time to meet with me and provide me with some information on the industry?” If the answer is yes, arrange an appointment time for either a face-to-face or phone meeting. If the answer is negative, say, “Could you recommend someone else I could contact?” Then repeat the process.

Begin by calling or writing to the people on your list who you can talk to most easily. It does get easier with each call and/or email!

Remember, an informational interview is not a job interview, but may bring you a job lead or referral.

When setting up informational interviews:
• Write an outline of what you are going to say on the phone. This will help you be less nervous.
• If you are calling as the result of a referral, use the name of the person who referred you to begin the conversation.
• Mention that you need only about 20 minutes of the person’s time for the informational interview.
• Express the need for a personal interview as opposed to a phone conversation.
• If someone sounds busy, he/she probably is. Ask if there is a better time to talk.

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

When you go to your informational interview, arrive early and dress appropriately. Write out questions you will ask in advance. During the informational interview, ask how the person got started, what they like and don’t like about their job, company, and industry. Ask for information about career opportunities in the field. Most important, ask who you should contact regarding possible opportunities. However, do not ask for an internship or job! This referral information is the key to getting results.

Ask open-ended questions (not yes/no) such as:

• How did you get started in this field?
• How did college prepare you for this job?
• Where do you see the industry heading in the next few years?
• What is a typical career path in this field or organization?
• What are entry-level positions in your field or organization? Can you describe them?
• Is there any type of training program? What skills and experience are necessary?
• What are the current career opportunities in the industry?
• Who else would you recommend I speak to for advice in this field?

After making contact:

Send a thank you note immediately. Personalize your letter by referencing something from your conversation that was particularly helpful.

Reflect on the conversation. Review your notes to make sure the information is clear. Ask yourself: What did I learn from this interview? What plan of action can I make?

Contact people referred to you in the informational interview. Make sure to mention the mutual contact, as well as reasons why the person you originally spoke with thought this new person might be helpful.

Stay in touch. If your original contact referred you to someone who was helpful or a resource was fruitful, send him/her a quick note with that information. Networking contacts are often sincerely interested in helping and are curious about what ultimately happens in your career adventures!