The ability to use contacts for discovering opportunities and helping you make decision is one of the most important skills that you can develop. Networking is about building relationships with people that can benefit you both. It is an essential skill for job hunting and can lead you to the ideal job. It is about a proactive and creative approach to the job market—not waiting for jobs to be advertised, but researching, contacting and communicating effectively with people and organisations. Many opportunities are never advertised via the traditional methods.

**Networking effectively**

Decide what you want to achieve before you begin. Are you looking for information about a particular career or sector, or are you looking for a chance to demonstrate your aptitude to a potential recruiter? It might be wise to start with the former, as a request for advice is more likely to generate a positive response than asking for a job. Identify who you want to speak to and in which organisations, aim for an individual currently working in a role that you are considering.

Do the ground work and find out as much as you can before you have a meeting or send a speculative letter; and prepare a list of questions so you don’t end up wasting their time (and yours). Even if you are only information gathering at this stage, it might be worth having a well-targeted CV handy just in case the person you are speaking to asks to see it. They might be able to suggest some improvements.

**Generating contacts**

Spread the word that you’re looking for a job. First, tell your family, friends, neighbours, acquaintances ... everyone. However, when it comes to networking, there’s more to consider than simply who you know. You also have to think about who you DON’T know. And then find a way to get to know those people. Professional associations often have student bodies that can provide an excellent way to meet the right people and to practice your networking skills.

**Opportunities to generate contacts may include:**

- People you almost know - the friends, relatives and colleagues of the people you know
- Temporary or part-time work to enhance your marketability and industry knowledge and to meet people in your target sector
- Voluntary work to build experience and meet new contacts
- Industry internships, keeping in touch with colleagues you met on your placement
- Professional associations, which may run networking events or useful training and conferences where you can make new links
- Careers events at university or elsewhere, speaking with representatives from many organisations in one place
- Your fellow students and academics. Building a good reputation amongst peers and colleagues is vital if you wish to progress.
- Social media sites such as LinkedIn and Twitter

**Approaching contacts**

The next step is to decide how to approach your target, either an informal phone call, email or social network invitation. It is worth noting that although some individuals will get back to you promptly, in the majority of cases you will need to chase them. A follow up phone call can be a very helpful
The meeting

If you have the opportunity to meet in person then remember that this person is giving you time out of their working day so go prepared, and research what you want to know and have serious questions. You also need to be aware of:

- The right time to leave, don’t outstay your welcome
- Your body language, treat it like an informal interview
- Keep records of each meeting
- Always send a thank-you letter or e-mail
- And keep them up-to-date with your progression

Try this networking exercise:

Write in the centre of a page the type of post you are seeking - your career goal (if you are still unsure, come and see a Careers and Employability Consultant). Using the space around that job title, write down all the possible contacts that you could ask for information and advice about that field and possible entry routes. Share what you have written with a friend or partner. Help one another to expand this network. Use your imagination! Let your friends know your career goal, they might have contacts as well!

Networking using social media

LinkedIn is a great professional networking resource that can help you to make contacts in your area of interest. Follow these tips to get the best from it:

- Fully complete your profile including a photo
- Join relevant groups and follow companies operating in your field
- Get involved in group discussions; it’s a good way for other people to learn your name
- Add a personal message when contacting new people explaining why you would like to connect with them. If you have met them before then remind them of where you met
- Don’t ask for something right away – build a relationship first
- Remember that networking is a 2-way process. Think about what you can offer to others in your network
- Link your LinkedIn and Twitter accounts together
- Read our information leaflet on using social media

10 top networking tips

1. Build your online network by using LinkedIn and Twitter
2. Be able to articulate what you are looking for and how others may help you
3. Identify the sectors and companies you want to target and keep up-to-date with developments
4. Attend relevant conferences and events and be proactive about meeting new people
5. Networking is a two-way process. Think about what you have to offer others
6. Be positive and realistic
7. Look for work shadowing opportunities
8. Follow up with contacts you meet at events
9. Research potential contacts before you meet them and prepare questions
10. Start now! Attend careers events while you are still studying.