

Networking online: how to make professional connections remotely and why it matters

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On paper, networking is a relatively simple task. Mingle with like-minded professionals while sipping wine and you greatly increase your chances of landing a coveted role, or building your dream career.

Pre-COVID, gearing up for a networking event, you would probably have walked into a venue, thinking, “Smile. Remember your elevator pitch. If all else fails, talk about the weather.”

Now though, many of us are faced with a slightly different predicament: how to network while working remotely. Operating out of makeshift home offices, with children demanding tea or pets stepping on keyboards, we have collectively become BBC Dad, AKA Robert Kelly. The Busan-based political scientist famously went viral in 2017 when his children interrupted a live interview he was doing on television, and his wife had to scramble to get them out of his office.



***This article is part of Quarter Life**, a series about issues affecting those of us in our twenties and thirties. From the challenges of beginning a career and taking care of our mental health, to the excitement of starting a family, adopting a pet or just making friends as an adult. The articles in this series explore the questions and bring answers as we navigate this turbulent period of life.*

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As tricky a proposition as it might be to meet people in such circumstances, research shows that rising to the challenge is worth it. According to one online survey, networking accounts for up to 85% of all filled vacancies. It can also lead to substantial pay rises, as evidenced by the recent story of how one employee secured a £24,000 pay rise solely through networking.



Networking is about showing an interest in what other people in your field are doing. Monkey Business Images | Shutterstock

My research shows that in early 2022, 44% of young people used social media to look for career information – up from only 19% a decade ago – and 42% consulted their social networks when looking to make a career decision. Online networking, even before the pandemic, was a crucial tool for career development.

How to network online

Remote working has of course seen videoconferencing become the norm. Online networking events are now routinely held on platforms including EventBrite, Slack, Yammer and Instagram live.

So first, do your research: identify the organisations, associations, and causes of most interest to you. Find the blogs and forums that are relevant to your field of work, and sign up to as many mailing lists as you can efficiently handle. Find your people and follow them on social media.

The goal of this first step is to increase the volume of information that you receive passively. This creates what is known as environmental affordance: the possibility for action afforded to you by your environment. The more regular updates about relevant events that you receive, the more likely you are to attend them.

Second, be strategic. In a world where conference dinners and impromptu water cooler conversations have been replaced by Zoom catch-ups, things aren't as spontaneous as they were before. Scheduling is key.

Create a personal networking plan. Decide how much time you are going to devote to online networking and note down your goals: how many people you want to speak to; which companies you want to find out more about; which specific people you need to

seek out to discuss specific topics. Make sure to schedule in time to maintain your online presence. And opt for a variety of engagements such as webinars, online recruitment fairs, one-to-one Zoom meetings, and online conferences.

Third, research shows that the most prolific networkers possess proactive personality traits, and are likely to score high on extroversion – a trait associated with being outgoing and seeking out new experiences – in personality tests. That does not mean, however, that you have to be an extrovert to succeed at networking. You just need to be proactive: proactive behaviour is the strongest predictor of networking success.

If there is a specific person or a group of professionals that you would like to build a relationship with, get in touch with them directly. Email them, message them on Twitter, set up a Zoom meeting, or research the online networking mixers they might take part in.



Schedule in time to go to online events and follow the people aligned with your interests. Siam Stock | Shutterstock

Why networking is critical to success

Networking underpins two key aspects of professional advancement: employability and self-directed career development.

The first, employability, pertains to what economists refer to as the human capital of a potential employee: their external marketability and the relative value of their educational background, technical skills, and soft skills – such as communication, time management and creativity – on the job market. Networking makes your human capital readily apparent to employers and prompts hiring decisions.

Self-directed career development, meanwhile, is an ongoing personal development project, whereby you seek career information and take action towards longterm career goals. Here, networking is a crucial means for obtaining career information. This both helps you raise your personal aspirations and figure out whether a particular job, company, or sector is right for you. The firsthand experiences of other people working in a given profession can be helpful in gauging whether you too would be a good fit.

Networking also helps to build relationships with mentors and role models, and gives access to peer support communities and professional groups. This is about more than just securing a job. It creates a sense of belonging and of professional identity, and in

doing so develops what social scientists term “social capital”: shared norms, values, and beliefs in professional communities.

Networking involves a number of skills – approaching others, finding common ground, maintaining relationships – that can be practised and learned. Of these, listening -- not talking – is perhaps the most important. Express an interest in other people’s work and ask them questions, and you’ll be well on your way to making meaningful connections that benefit not only you as an individual. Because they bolster knowledge exchange and collective problem-solving, they benefit your community too.

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