

Making the most of networking opportunities

Networking is viewed as one of the keys to success. Local, regional and national events offer us fantastic opportunities for networking with like-minded professionals. Sounds easy doesn't it?

Not everyone finds networking easy, and you're not alone if you find face-to-face networking a bit daunting. With our increasing reliance on social media many people feel more comfortable engaging with people online than in person. It can be overwhelming when there are lots of people at an event and difficult to know how to mingle with strangers. If it's something that doesn't feel comfortable, it is easier to avoid it and tell yourself that it's not for you.

Exchanging information is a key benefit of networking as it exposes you to new ideas and insights that you might not otherwise have thought of. It enables you to share good practice in your area of expertise or in your institution. However, networking has some negative connotations based on suspicion about the motives behind it. It may be that some people network solely with self-interest in mind, but that shouldn't stop us from engaging with colleagues in reciprocal ways that support our values. Another perception is that networking is reserved for 'more senior' colleagues. Some senior colleagues may have more frequent opportunities for networking, but networking is an important part of being a professional across all levels, career stages, and types of role.

Here are some hints and tips to help you get the most out of networking opportunities:

- Prepare before the event by looking at the delegate list and event programme and you may like to set yourself a goal, e.g. to meet three people you've not met before
- Put away your mobile phone
- Notice if others are by themselves and go over and introduce yourself, even if you are with colleagues or in a group that feels comfortable
- Be yourself - these initial conversations may lead to ongoing professional relationships so need to be grounded on authenticity
- Recognise that you won't necessarily connect with everyone you meet. This is only to be expected, just like meeting people in any other context
- Focus on what you can give rather than what you can get – it's a reciprocal relationship that helps both parties equally
- Quality is more important than quantity - networking isn't like speed-dating. If you leave having made one or two new connections that is a great outcome
- Spot synergies between people - connect the parties concerned and learn from the mutual benefits gained
- Have a couple of introductory sentences that you feel comfortable with. For example, "Hi, I'm Jan and I'm based in Milton Keynes. How far have you travelled today?"
- Make a conscious effort to join a table where you don't know any of the colleagues who are already seated, even if you are attending with colleagues
- Follow up after the event with those you felt most connected with. LinkedIn is a great tool for this as you can search for a colleague even if you do not have their business card
- If you agreed to do something, make sure that you follow through