3 Tips to Start Your Networking Process

**Networking**. For some, this word confuses or terrifies. This article defines networking and provides three tips to make the process less terrifying.

**What is networking?** At the basic level, networking is relationship building. Obviously, building relationships takes time. This is why the Career Center strongly encourages students early in their college experience to get involved in on- and off-campus activities, meet people, and develop relationships. Students can begin by exploring any of the more than 300 student organizations at Missouri State: [http://organizations.missouristate.edu/guide/](http://organizations.missouristate.edu/guide/) However, it never is too late to get involved and meet new people.

**Why is networking important?** The majority of job openings—some sources say as much as 90%—are never advertised. So how do people learn of job openings? Through “word of mouth,” which often is not a *direct* connection. Instead, we often learn of opportunities through more indirect routes—from “someone who knows someone who knows someone.” In your network of contacts you may discover someone who is willing to mentor you—giving you advice and helping you navigate turbulence in your career. Then after you begin your career, you can help others who are starting their careers. And the cycle continues.

Following are three tips for developing a network of contacts.

**Tip #1: Start with the people you know.**

**Family and friends of family:** Whether or not family members work in the career that you’re pursuing, they may know people in that field. For example, you may discover that a parent or sibling went to school with someone who’s now working in that profession.

**Friends and family of friends:** Because we share interests with our friends, it makes sense that we often gravitate toward the same professions. If a friend has established a positive reputation in his/her career, then a referral for you may open doors. In addition, we often don’t discuss the professions of our friends’ families, so this may be a helpful, untapped resource.

**Current and former teachers:** Teachers often stay connected with their former students, so they may be able to provide you with a contact.
Individuals in the community: You probably have already established several contacts with people in the community through volunteer organizations and religious and political affiliations.

**Tip #2: Use social media.**

LinkedIn is one of the best social media sites for networking at the professional level. Not only can you join groups related to your career and interests, but you also can connect with alumni. Social media is great for staying in touch with people from all over the globe and for establishing connections (for example, a Facebook friend of your friend could become your new connection).

**Tip #3: Get away from social media.**

Some studies claim that people who spend too much time on their devices have more difficulty when it comes to talking with people face-to-face. Although social media seems to have been specially designed with introverts in mind, too much time spent on devices could have negative ramifications for people who already struggle with meeting new people.

Get involved with campus and community organizations and events. When you attend events, talk to people. Ask them about themselves and get to know them. While social media is a good starting point to introduce you and keep you updated, it can’t replace the impact that face-to-face meetings have.

If the idea of talking to strangers feels too intimidating, then you might want to explore the advice offered by Debra Fine, author of *The Fine Art of Small Talk* ([http://www.debrafine.com/](http://www.debrafine.com/)). In her book, articles, and website, Fine provides several tips. For example, when attending a function, we should prepare ahead of time three things to talk to people about, listen more than we talk, and make sure our body language communicates confidence.