



Networking reframed

Tips for tertiary students with neurodivergent conditions

Networking is critical to securing work, but the idea of networking might make you want to run and hide!

Networking is really about getting your support network together and asking for directions.

Let's reframe:

- When you last needed directions and you didn't have your GPS or smartphone, who did you ask?
- Can you remember a time when someone asked you for directions? Could you help?
- When you helped, did you feel exploited or offended? You probably felt quite pleased that someone asked you and that you could help.

NETWORKING IS SIMPLE:

IT'S ASKING FOR DIRECTIONS TO AN UNKNOWN DESTINATION

Networking is about asking for help – not about looking to make friends – and the people you ask to help you will understand that.

Outbound networking

This starts with the people who you already know. It is about asking people in your existing network for directions:

I am about to complete my degree and ready to start my career. Do you know anyone who works in graphic design?

You might not receive a response immediately, and you might need to reach out to your network a few times before you get some directions. That is normal.

Start by writing down who is in your outbound network already. Include:

- family
- friends
- colleagues at university
- colleagues in clubs or social groups
- current employers and colleagues at work.

Inbound networking

This is reaching out to a broader network beyond your “inner circle”. It is best used when you are seeking specific directions.

Your social media platforms include pages for your groups, local community, etc. You will be surprised how many people in this broader network are willing to help.

Here are some tips to get started.

- **Decide who to target.** Think of the companies you are interested in. Search hashtags and go through your LinkedIn contacts.
- **What do you want to know?** When you seek directions, you need to be specific:
 - Are they neurodiversity aware? For example, ask them if they have worked with people who have neurodivergent conditions before.
 - What types of work roles exist in their field or industry?
 - What are their recruitment practices like? Ask specific questions about how they interview people. (Is it face-to-face or a panel interview? Do they like candidates to present a video of themselves talking?)
- **Do your homework.** Before making contact with someone who you think could be a good support or mentor, find out who they are. What experience and expertise do they have?
- **Practise writing an email or social media message.** Include who you are and your studies/major/interests. Mention how you found them, and ask them your questions. Think of this as your elevator pitch: outline your goals, values and interests with a focus on the career opportunity you are exploring. Keep it authentic, short and conversational if face to face.
- **Face-to-face catch up.** Remember, people love to help and provide directions. A face-to-face catch-up can follow the email/message. Keep it casual. Offer to buy a coffee or meet for a quick chat.
- **Follow up.** This can be uncomfortable, but people get busy – don’t think they are deliberately ignoring you. There are many possible reasons why a response is delayed.

Networking from a neurodiversity perspective

The text below is from a wonderful article titled “Why I hate small talk and networking”.
([Why I hate small talk and networking as a neurodiverse woman | SBS Voices](#))

I am a neuro divergent Muslim woman of colour with borderline personality disorder (BPD). Networking confuses me and I hate small talk.

I glance at the seating arrangements. I’ve been placed next to a stranger. My heart thunders in my chest as my mind races through self-taught tips:

- 1. Don’t be stand-offish*
- 2. Ask people who they are and what they like*
- 3. If you are confused or an answer doesn’t interest you, be subtle in changing the topic*
- 4. Above all, don’t relate everything back to your disability*

One thing I have learnt is talking about disability makes people uncomfortable. No amount of reposts on social media or hashtags change this reality. Networking events are not exempt from this.

As a neuro divergent person, I perceived that networking required me to get people to like me. For me, conversations at networking events are a means to an end to create contacts for work purposes.

But the reality? We exist in all spheres of society. And I will continue to create change by taking up space, expressing myself and my needs and changing the culture by being unapologetically myself.

Clever ways to say hello

Striking up a conversation can be daunting, particularly with a stranger. You are not intruding by saying hello. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- If you are in a crowd, look for someone standing on their own. They may be feeling as awkward as you and be grateful you have gone to chat.
- Strike up casual conversation: “Wow, big turnout for this event tonight!” or “The food is amazing!” etc.
- Once you have chatted for a while and if you feel comfortable doing so, offer genuine compliments. You might say that you like what they are wearing or that you’re impressed by where they work. This is a great way to break the ice and will put the other person in a positive mindset.

Following up

Remember to ask for a business card or find out whether you can connect with the person on LinkedIn before you leave the conversation. Ask: *“I would love to stay in touch and follow up with you. If that’s okay with you, what’s the best way to contact you?”*

Other resources

- Visit your university careers centre for more advice on networking.