

How to build effective, professional networks (Part I)

Did you know that [85% of all jobs are filled via networking?](#)

This resource helps you develop and extend a network of professional contacts. Maintaining these contacts is the most difficult part, and that challenge will be covered in Part II of this series. Network building has multiple benefits in terms of employability. For example, your elevator pitch becomes “real” when you think about delivering it to one of the circles, often requiring multiple versions of your speech.

Thinking about who you know or want to know, and about how you might interact with each person or business, influences everything from promotional materials to motivation. Try to develop the confidence to walk across a crowded room and introduce yourself to someone new.

It's not just who you know, it's who knows you

A living, evolving, working network of professional contacts forms the vital core of an emerging career and it's never too early to start. The old adage, ‘it's not what you know, it's who you know,’ has a powerful ring of truth, but in reality ‘who you know’ doesn't take the process far enough – you can have a database or phone full of professional acquaintances, but if you don't actively stay in touch with those contacts they will not do you much good over time (see p.4).

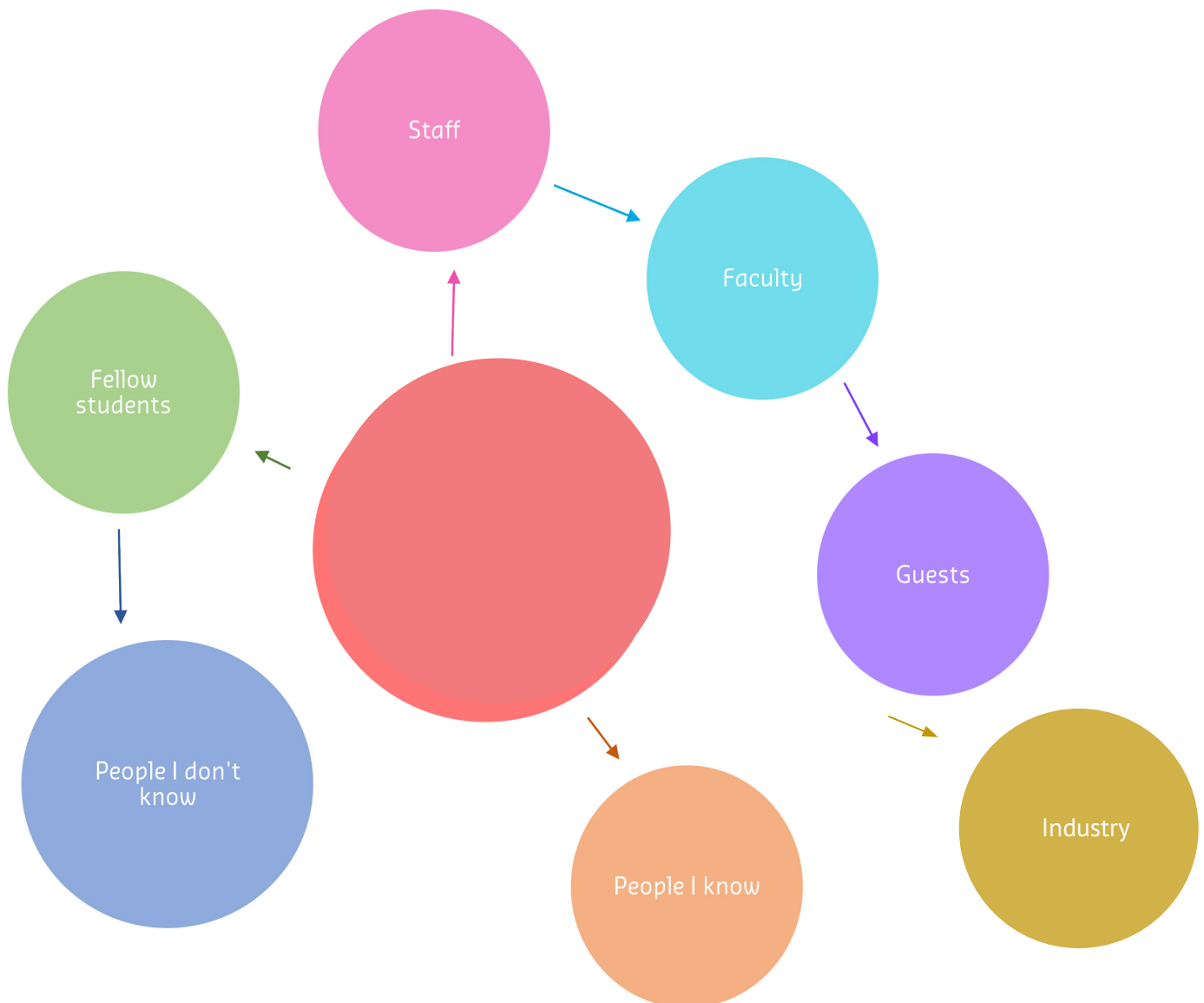
Developing professional contacts and keeping track of them is easier than ever in today's mobile and digitally connected world, but it is also important to create workable systems for managing your circles of contacts and keeping them fresh. This resource will provide some ideas for starting these processes.

Everyone has many circles of connected colleagues, friends, family, and community, any of whom may prove useful when developing a career. Sometimes these circles overlap and other times they are distinct from one another. Developing an intentional approach to building these circles of contacts, along with an effective contact management system that fits your career aspirations and your lifestyle, will prove invaluable as you launch your career and sustain it over time. The next section provides a guide to the circle building process.

Start by drawing circles on a large piece of paper and name each circle for a group of people you are connected to. For example: After adding as many circles as you can think of (you can always add more later), choose one circle to work with first and begin building out the categories of people you know. For example:



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Once you have identified the major categories of potential contacts within a circle, start identifying people you already know within that category, along with those you do not yet know but may be interested to meet.

Continue that process throughout all the layers of circles within one of your large categories before going on to another. Through this process, you will begin to realise how many contacts you have already made, and how many potential connections are virtually at your fingertips to develop.

Keep adding names without judging an individual's likelihood of being helpful to your career at this time. Look for points of connection between your circles, too.

This exercise is an easy and graphic way to realise the breadth of circles you already have and, at the same time, identify some places where you might want to develop circles more actively.

There is no greater resource in building and sustaining a career than personal relationships developed over time. To build and develop your circles, it is vitally important to be out in the world on a regular basis.

Here are a few quick suggestions for setting up your future circle building:

- Attend industry events on and off campus.
- Volunteer to help with events on campus. Host a reception, staff an information table, tutor fellow students, become a peer advisor, join an advisory committee, help plan events, volunteer for things.
- Attend open business seminars and lectures in your field.
- Join and become active in relevant professional organisations.
- When you're in a group, make a conscious effort to meet (and also reconnect) with people. If that sounds outside of your comfort zone, try reaching out to just one other person in the room. Introduce yourself, ask questions, and be a good listener.
- When you meet someone you would like to know better, suggest a follow-up meeting over coffee or lunch.
- Always send thank-you notes or emails after meetings.
- Stay in touch with brief 'thinking of you' emails every once in a while with those you do not see regularly.

You may resist this sort of conscious connection making and think that it feels like fishing for new contacts you can 'use'. Remember that circle building is a two-way street. You are not simply tapping other professionals for their contacts and expertise; you also bring your own expertise and contacts to the conversation.

As an active member of the professional community, as well as a good listener, you will inevitably have much to offer others. So in actual practice, circle building simply means building professional relationships and friendships. It is rarely clear which connections will 'pay out' over time.

Some new connections evolve quickly into working relationships, others simmer for years. Quite often, they evolve in directions you could never have predicted, and that is half the fun.

Do not get too invested in any one contact or their perceived value to you. Above all, take good care of your circles – they are the heart and soul of your career.

In addition, build your circles with a personal reputation as someone who is a dependable colleague, a hard worker, punctual, fun to spend time with, and goes the extra mile when necessary, so others will want you as an important part of their circles. In the long run it always pays off to be authentic, honest, and personable in your personal interactions; in a highly competitive world, almost everyone is accomplished.

There are expectations of quality, but your potential colleagues are also interested in a low-maintenance, dependable colleague.

One additional thought: judiciously avoid losing a contact over a dispute or disagreement. Regardless of who is 'at fault', the end result of burning a bridge with anyone can be very difficult to repair and can have long-lasting negative consequences.

Make it count!

Returning to the importance of having a personal reputation as someone who is a dependable colleague, what words would you use to describe such a person? If any of these words relate to you personally, list them as strengths in your CV and try to include some of them in your capacity statement

This resource was developed by Janis Weller (McNally Smith College of Music) and Dawn Bennett (Bond University).