

# Liberty University School of Law

## Center for Career & Professional Development

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### How to Develop a Network

Networking is an often overlooked tool used to identify opportunities and help with entry into the legal field. Even though you may not have direct connections with people who can help you obtain a position with a particular organization, you may know someone who knows someone else who could provide you entry to your “dream job.” Networking and relationship building can make the difference between those who succeed and those who spend their professional careers frustrated because of a lack of options due to poor research, communications, and/or follow through. Three primary methods are used to develop a network of professional relationships.

- Speaking to friends or family members about any relationships they may have with individuals in the legal community or who do business in the legal arena.
- Seeking informational interviews with those currently in positions in areas of law that interest you. Asking for advice or wise counsel from those who practice in or are familiar with your area(s) of interest.
- Attending events where legal professionals socialize, train, or do business.

The first and most obvious connections you can make are those that already exist among your family and friends. Make a list of the family members and friends to contact; ask them for information about legal contacts or relationships they might have. Keep track of who referred whom. You will want to reference this information when you contact the person with whom you want to set up an informational interview.

The informational interview is a great way to meet with individuals who are able to expand your contact base in an informal way; it is a time for you to gather information from someone in a particular field about his experiences, observations, recommendations, and career options. This is not a job interview. Your objective is to develop a relationship for networking purposes. If something evolves later from the relationship, great! However, you are not meeting with the intent to ask about current available positions. Have a copy of your resumé available, but don't offer it unless your contact asks.

Some possible questions to ask during the meeting:

1. How did you decide to practice in this area of law?
2. Is the practice area a growing one?
3. What other practice areas do you feel are poised for growth?
4. What types of skills are important for success in this field?
5. Do you have any suggestions for interviewing in this field?
6. What bar associations or other groups do you recommend joining to advance in this field?
7. Do you have any advice on how to best market or prepare myself to enter this field?

Unless your contact gives you clear permission to stay longer, ensure you do not take more of the individual's time than you requested. If you made the appointment for 15-20 minutes, stick to that time frame. Attorneys are busy people, and you need to be sensitive to that. Also, be sure to ask if the attorney can recommend someone else who would be willing to speak to you to discuss the same or similar subjects. Request permission to mention the attorney as a contact reference.

Immediately after you return to your desk from the informational interview, send the individual a personal, written thank-you note. Mention that you appreciate his or her time and that you intend to make good use of the information provided.

A third method to expand your network is to attend an event where there will be numerous attorneys present. Local bar meetings, professional conferences, etc., are intended for attorney networking. When you attend an event, don't stand in a corner or only speak to people you know. Meet and introduce yourself to as many people as possible. Initiate conversations. Find out names (and use them), what type of work they do, and how they are enjoying their work. Be positive and upbeat. Make them feel comfortable and welcome by asking questions about themselves (everyone likes to talk about themselves). Read the paper the day of the event and discuss current newsworthy issues. Remember, it is usually advisable to avoid emotionally charged subjects such as religion or politics unless you know your audience. Subtly let them know the area of law in which you are interested and why. When you leave, ask them if you may have one of their business cards, as you offer them one of your own. Set a goal to obtain at least four business cards before the event is over.

Honing your network skills is imperative not only to your career development, but also to your professional success. Practicing lawyers know that networking is critical. In private practice, networking is how attorneys develop a client base. In public interest and government practice, networking enables lawyers to be more effective. Networking while you are a law student is never a waste of time. You are developing the skills and contacts on which you will rely throughout your professional career.