

Navigating Your Network

By Victor Figueroa

“Just go home and talk with your parents. See if they have any internships or job opportunities at their companies”. This is the very first piece of advice about networking many of us receive in school. But what if your parents don't work in the industry you are interested in? What if your parents don't work? What if you don't have a close relationship with the adults in your life?

I had the privilege to attend a predominantly white school in an affluent suburb full of doctors, lawyers, and executives. A school that never struggled with funding, offered a wide variety of subjects such as engineering, rapid prototyping & 3d printing, and postcolonial literature. I had access to incredible teachers who worked hard to support their students. Every morning when I walked into school, I became someone else, I seemed to fit in with my peers. But in actuality, my life was very different. I grew up with uncertainty in housing: transitioning between living with my single mother and younger brother in a Motel 6, a halfway house, low-income housing, foster care, and finally in guardianship with my grandparents. I battled with food insecurity and money was always the problem, and never a resource.

I struggled with my identity, I struggled to make friends, I struggled with adapting to changes and nuances of my life. Challenges that many of my peers didn't have to face. Challenges that I never talked about. We each face unique challenges that make us feel different and isolate us from our peers. Frozen in fear and worried that no one would understand, we often feel like it's us against the world.

As a Wily scholar, we all have a different story that makes us unique, and depending on how comfortable you are, it might make sense to share your story. You are incredible and your story is yours, own it and share it with who you want to. This blog post is the first time I am sharing part of my story so openly. And while I was certainly nervous writing this, it was also incredibly empowering to put a piece of my story into words. I have always said that my past doesn't define me, however, my experiences have absolutely helped instill my values. I am

resilient, hardworking, determined, passionate, and resourceful. I wasn't going to let myself be a victim of circumstances, and succumb to the people who told me I would never make it.

Networking was one of those things that exacerbated this feeling of being different. We are told to leverage our parents' networks. But as someone who didn't have a strong relationship with the adults in my life, I didn't know who to ask. I had a rough idea of my interests and what I wanted to study, so I thought I could just skip the networking part and figure everything out on my own. I quickly realized that trying to do everything on your own is a daunting task. Having someone to help filter out the noise, share their advice, and point me in the right direction was invaluable.

Ok, so you've heard about networking, it sounds fairly useful, but is it really that important?

Short answer, ABSOLUTELY.

There's a reason there are so many sayings about your network: "Your network is your net worth", "You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with", and "Show me your friends and I'll show you your future". There's a strong correlation that the relationships you build and the people you surround yourself with, influence who you become and what your future will look like. If you are surrounded by unmotivated people who are willing to settle for less, you will begin to adopt that mentality. Likewise, if you surround yourself with people who take risks, work hard and encourage you to get back up when you inevitably fail, you are going to feel supported and encouraged to follow your dreams. In my own life, I have mentors and peers who keep me in mind when job opportunities come up, encourage me to keep learning and follow my interests, pick me up when I fail, and help me evaluate big decisions. Taboo topics like salary negotiation and realistic expectations on work-life balance are incredibly important to understand, but there are very few resources available to educate yourself. Growing up, the adults in my life would tell me that I should be grateful to be paid at all. Whereas my peers have had access to parents and role models that could give them a unique insight into their industries that I could never learn on my own. Mentors who have experienced working in your industry and know how to navigate a career can provide these insights and share the pearls of wisdom that they have picked up throughout their careers.

Now you might be sitting there thinking “Great, I understand the value of networking, but how on earth do I find a mentor who wants to help me?” And I’ll admit it’s no easy task, but here are some tips for finding a mentor, building meaningful relationships, and maintaining them.

1. **Just let the conversation flow.** Many of the connections I have made networking were unintentional. Some of the most incredible people I have met have been just from putting myself out there and just having a natural conversation. I am a fairly shy person and there’s plenty of times where I just don’t feel comfortable putting myself out there, especially in large groups. But I highly recommend practicing public speaking and starting small. If you are too nervous to reach out to people in a large meeting, get their contact info and reach out to them afterward.
2. **Mentors are people that want you to succeed** and are not in it for any personal gain. Those social media gurus that are selling classes or want to take a percentage of your salary if they help you get hired are not mentors. They are people running a business and like any business, they are there to make money.
3. **Don’t get discouraged.** When you reach out, you will have many people who will never respond or turn you down. That’s ok. People are busy and it has nothing to do with you. Just keep looking and reaching out and being as respectful as possible. Just like applying to companies, it’s a numbers game, cast a wide net, learn from your rejections, and better yourself so that when you receive a handful of positive responses you can thrive.
4. **Mentorship is a two-way street.** Now you might think you don’t have much to offer, but you do. Being respectful and appreciative is all you need to do. These people are taking the time out of their busy days to help you. They don’t expect money or you to be able to solve their problems, but rather that they aren’t wasting their time. Show them that their investment in your future will not only help you but compound and ultimately benefit many more people.
5. **Start now!** Don’t worry about being too young or not knowing enough, to start networking. That’s perfectly fine. Mentors want to help young people who still have a lot to figure out because you remind them of their younger selves. Everyone started out feeling unsure of themselves and trying to navigate the new chapters of their

lives. And many people want to share the things they have learned from the years of making mistakes so that you and others don't need to make the same ones. No one will fault you for being unsure and confused, just take initiative and have an open mind.

6. **Be authentic and genuine.** Do not reach out to people and feel the need to be someone you are not. You want to build an actual relationship with your mentors. To do that you have to be your authentic self. Talk about your passions, goals, and ambitions, but also your fears.
7. **Don't make things transactional.** No one likes feeling used or that they are in a one-sided relationship. Like I mentioned before, mentorship is a two-way street. You don't want to only be reaching out to your mentor when you need something. Update them about your life and tell them about your successes. Check in with them occasionally and always be sure to thank them for their time and investment in your future.
8. **Use your extracurriculars!** If you are part of a club or sport, network with other members of that club/sport. Reach out to alumni who are now in the industry you are interested in working in. Being able to relate with each other is an important part of mentorship. If your mentor doesn't fully understand your position and your challenges they can't give you effective advice. If you can't relate to your mentor's background you might find that some of their advice isn't as applicable. On that same note, when you do end up working for a company, join a BRG. Business Resource Groups may be called other things at your company, but they are there to bring together communities of employees. There is a strong culture of mentorship in these groups. Read more about the benefits of BRGs [here](#).
9. **When reaching out to a mentor try to be as organized as possible.** This will show your mentor that you are thoughtful, take initiative, and it will also allow them to better understand your question. When setting up meetings, include your questions or an agenda. This will give your mentor the opportunity to provide more thorough responses and reach out to peers who might be more familiar with that topic.
10. **Utilize LinkedIn to connect with peers and mentors.** Having a strong presence on LinkedIn and a well-written resume will exponentially improve your chances of potential mentors' response on LinkedIn and companies responding to your

applications. When you apply to large companies online, most have a computer parser that will scan your resume for keywords and metrics like GPA and work history. Then recruiters and hiring managers will filter candidates and look at a subset of all the applications. To make your application stand out, you need to build your resume in the clearest and most metric forward way possible. Check out these links on [entry-level resumes](#), [technical resumes](#), [improving your LinkedIn profile](#), [some career tips](#), and [this extensive presentation](#).

11. **You are not alone.** If you ever start feeling discouraged or like you don't belong, please, please, please read up on impostor syndrome and talk to someone in your industry about it. Statistically, the majority of all employees experience some feeling of not being good enough or feeling like a fraud. You are absolutely not alone and there are a ton of amazing resources out there to help. Check out this [article](#) that provides an overview of what imposter syndrome is, how it affects people, and how to combat it. That being said, don't dismiss systemic and organizational issues as importer syndrome. This [article](#) talks about the history of impostor syndrome and the challenges that women in particular have faced in the workplace.
12. **In summary**, be your authentic self, take risks, and build deep connections. Be organized, thoughtful, and show your appreciation. And most importantly never give up on yourself!