

Starting from scratch

some common misconceptions about building a network in the UK



Whether we want to admit it or not, we all know that a healthy network is key to building a new life in a new country. So if you're job-hunting or just want to know the best way to book a train ticket, you need people who can help. But how do you find them? Here are a few of the most common misconceptions that I've encountered in my work writing about and teaching networking skills.

1. I don't know anybody

Yes, you do, and so do your family, friends and colleagues back home. And don't discount help from neighbours, your partner's colleagues, the letting agent, local shopkeepers, people at the gym... One of the joys and continual surprises of networking is that you can never, ever predict who knows whom, so one of the keys to success is to be open to meeting a wide range of people, even if you can't fit them neatly into your game plan. It's best not to restrict yourself to the obvious contacts and don't turn down offers of introductions to people outside your particular profession.

Another way of meeting like-minded people is, quite simply, to get out and about. Join professional associations, social clubs, and cultural organisations. And if you are really serious about extending your network, get involved. Most organisations are crying out for volunteers to organise events, committees etc. Cold calling as a private citizen is difficult; contacting someone on behalf of, say, the Association of Women Solicitors or the UK branch of the University of the Andes alumni association is much easier.

2. I don't have any good friends here

Many people think that their network should be packed full of close and trusted friends. Friends are important, of course, but building trust takes time, so be patient. Don't discount people you don't know very well – these acquaintances (or weak ties) can be, and usually are, surprisingly significant. Why? Simply because of our natural tendency to cluster – our strong ties, the people we call friends or close colleagues, tend to be rather like ourselves. We come from the same country, similar backgrounds, speak the same language, work in the same profession. That means that we live in a similar world and know similar people.

If you want to extend your reach beyond your expat community or the few companies that you are directly connected to, you need to seize any opportunity to connect with people outside your normal circle. A healthy and vibrant network embraces different backgrounds, ages and professions. Some are the close ties on whom we rely for support, others will be the weak ties whom help us bridge gaps and make inroads into new worlds.

3. How can I ask for help? What do I have to offer in return?

An English idiom may help here: if you don't ask, you don't get. Don't expect people to know automatically what you need or how they can help. Cultural norms vary, of course, so you'll need to do your best to adapt. In the US or Australia, a straightforward request may work best. In the Far East, you might be accustomed to being more circumspect. Here, it is important not to put someone in an uncomfortable position by directly asking for a job. Instead, tell them that as part of your job search you need advice or information and you hope they might be able to help. Could they spare time for a quick chat? Nowadays, that will probably have to be via Zoom rather than a real cup of coffee, but the principle remains much the same. People like to help, and most of us are susceptible to gentle flattery! Remember, too, that so often, what you need is really easy for them to give. Advice is free, after all, and an appropriate introduction isn't a big deal for most people.

Don't underestimate what you can give in return. Maybe you could provide insights into a different and interesting culture. Or practical help if they intend to travel to your country. Once you are settled, you may be able to return the favour by introducing them to someone helpful in your network. And last but not least, you may simply be the most interesting and least demanding person they talk to that day.

4. I'm nervous of being misunderstood or of misunderstanding

It's important to manage your expectations: you will almost certainly make mistakes and get things wrong. Even if you are an English speaker, you can't assume that you don't need to learn the rules of the game. And the fact that you have been to the UK many times on holiday, or seen lots of English films, or



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have good British friends may help, but won't protect you completely.

So what to do? Being prepared is half the battle – if you know misunderstandings are pretty inevitable, it'll be easier to get over them and not let them stop you in your tracks. In addition, get help and advice from both your fellow compatriots and from locals.

Ask a friendly native to read your CV or covering letter, for example, to confirm that they can make sense of it. Some Brits may be used to working with foreigners and be able to both make allowances and help steer you through the assault course of dos and don'ts. Others will be less self-aware: the problem with culture (and that includes networking culture) is that it is largely invisible and subconscious. We often don't realise that we do what we do and we can't explain what goes against the grain until we are faced with it. Fellow Brazilians or Koreans who have been here longer than you may be able to explain what's acceptable and what isn't more easily than an English person.

5. How on earth can I meet anybody at the moment?

Finally, let me talk about the pandemic. Of course, we can't meet people quite as casually at a conference or networking event as we did in pre-pandemic days. So we all have to learn to be a little more inventive and a little more directed in our attempts to build our professional networks. Make a list of all the people you could contact (weak ties as well as strong ties, people you interact with regularly as well as people you haven't spoken to for some time). Look at your contacts on LinkedIn and see who they might be able to introduce you, too. And take heart. I personally have found that while people are often hesitant about arranging a face-to-face meeting, suggesting a brief chat on Zoom is often much easier to arrange.

I'd like to leave you with another time-honoured English saying: practice makes perfect. Accept that you'll make mistakes, but also be willing to learn from them. That way, you'll be well on the way to building a supportive network in the UK.



While on the Sloan Masters programme at London Business School, **Judith Perle** identified a gap in the training market for key soft skills that are all too often overlooked or neglected. As a result, she co-founded Management Advantage, a training consultancy that specialises in interpersonal skills, and works with universities, professional organisations, business schools and companies throughout the UK and elsewhere in Europe. She is also co-author of *The Network Effect*, which walks the reader through everything they should know about connecting with other people. For more information visit www.manadvan.com.