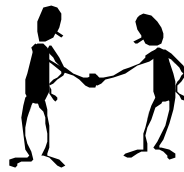


**Networking opportunities - choosing what will work for you**  
**By Maureen Ghirelli**

This article is about finding networking opportunities that will work best for you. Making the most of your networking opportunities - the 'how to' of networking - is covered in an earlier article in this series: "Test your networking skills".

Networking opportunities vary by region - in my local area it is a thriving activity, where you could probably meet fellow business people most mornings, lunchtimes and evenings if you really set your mind to it!



**Your purpose in networking**

Networking can be a lot of fun, but it can just as easily consume a disproportionate amount of your valuable time. It's therefore worth being clear about why you wish to network and with whom.

Some events are purely for the purpose of networking, whereas others are primarily for learning and offer scope for networking as an added bonus.

In deciding whether to participate in an event, it helps to be clear about your purpose - whether this is to generate work, to get to know others in the area and get known, to learn more about a particular topic/speaker/organisation, to hone your networking skills, or to maintain ongoing relationships (this can be important for consultants working on their own).

**Who are the people you wish to meet?**

First, be clear about who are your ideal clients and what are your ideal projects. If you don't know, how will you communicate this to others?

Consider where you might meet these potential clients. Step into their shoes and think as if you were them - what might interest you? If you have the opportunity e.g. with existing clients, why not ask what events they go to?

Alternatively, you may not be able to meet your ideal clients easily but instead meet others who do know them, as friends, neighbours, or suppliers of different services or products. In fact, people you might regard as your competitors may also turn out to be your best referrals, simply because they are more likely to understand your capabilities; they can equally act as a good source of knowledge and as a 'sounding board' to test out your ideas.

Small and medium sized businesses are more likely to participate in pure networking events. Employees in large companies are usually perceived as being less accessible; although they are less likely to participate in formal networking events, they may attend meetings organised by their professional organisations, or relevant trade fairs and exhibitions, as well as events to update their skills and knowledge.

## Networking ideas

Networking is often thought of as a face-to-face activity, but there are also opportunities by telephone as well as e-mail. Some you will find easier and more fulfilling than others. Some ideas:

- Weekly breakfast meetings
- Regular evening meetings
- Monthly breakfast meetings
- Monthly lunch groups
- Regular events throughout the year
- Meetings organised by professional bodies
- Ad hoc seminars organised by professional / consultancy firms
- Local employers associations
- Self-employed networks
- Interim networks
- Meetings of associates who work for one larger consultancy firm
- Any training event
- Charity work
- Exhibitions
- Existing and former employers / clients
- Newsletters
- E-mail forums and e-clubs

We will return to these in more detail later on.

## How do you choose your network(s)?

I take into account a variety of factors and will often combine learning activities with networking i.e. two activities for the time of one. This also makes your CPD (continuous professional development) easier to achieve.

Possible criteria:

- Which events are your ideal clients likely to participate in?
- Which events might colleagues in complementary fields attend (e.g. insolvency with factoring services)?
- What is your availability - morning, lunch, evening, daytime?
- When do you operate best? There is little point in committing to morning meetings if you are barely civil at this time of day!
- How much structure to the meetings do you prefer? As a broad generalisation, the more frequently the group meets, the more formal the networking structure
- Amount of time involved relative to the value of the activity
- Accessibility, including parking if relevant
- Cost and anticipated enjoyment of the event
- Do you like the ambience and environment?
- Is it effective for you (a combination of your networking skills as well as the appropriate networks)?
- Will the contact with you be of interest and value to the participants (e.g. will your newsletter, newspaper clipping, or phone call be something that they welcome)?

Do one or more of these factors tip the balance?

It pays to visit different groups to check them out. Generally you are able to attend once or twice as a guest and you only have to cover the one-off cost of the meal or event. Groups usually welcome 'new blood' as a means of expanding the group and opening up opportunities.

## **More detail about network events**

Weekly breakfast meetings: These typically start at 7.00/7.30 am and conclude by 8.30/9 am. Examples of these include those organised by BRE, BNI, or locally organised groups. They have a formal networking structure, are membership-based, and you will be expected to give a one-minute stand-up presentation. Usually only one person is permitted from each trade or profession to join a group. Typically they require a commitment to attend weekly, or to send a substitute, so there are frequent opportunities to sharpen up how you present your product or service. They may require that you provide regular referrals for others within that network club. As an alternative to membership, offering to act as a substitute gives you some of the benefits without the regular commitment, and you will still be welcomed.

Web: [www.bni-europe.com](http://www.bni-europe.com) and [www.bni.com](http://www.bni.com) and [www.brenet.co.uk](http://www.brenet.co.uk)

Regular evening meetings: An example is Missing Link, which offers local membership-based groups which typically meet fortnightly from about 6.45 pm to 9 pm. No meal is involved. You give a one-minute presentation to others sitting around the table, and you will be rotated between tables during the course of the evening. These provide ample opportunities to sharpen your skills.

Web: [www.misslink.co.uk](http://www.misslink.co.uk)

Monthly breakfast meetings: These are often sponsored by one or more professional firms, or in association with the local Chamber of Commerce or Business Link. They are held at the same time as weekly breakfast meetings and are likely to include a speaker for part of the meeting.

Monthly lunch groups: These are often sponsored by one or more professional firms, or in association with the local Chamber of Commerce or Business Link. They may include a speaker for part of the meeting.

Regular events throughout the year: Your local Chamber of Commerce or Business Link will usually be able to point you towards many of the regular networking events in their area, including ones organised by them. Also enquire about local business publications; these are a valuable source of information as well as providing the opportunity to include articles or advertisements.

Web: [www.chamberonline.co.uk](http://www.chamberonline.co.uk) and [www.businesslink.gov.uk/bdotg/action/home](http://www.businesslink.gov.uk/bdotg/action/home)

Meetings organised by professional bodies: These are usually organised around a topic of interest to the professional group. Membership of that professional body e.g. CIPD, IoD, CMI, is normally required if you wish to attend on an ongoing basis. Attendance at events ranges from students to experienced professionals.

Ad hoc seminars organised by professional / consultancy firms: These are usually initiated by the sponsoring organisation as an opportunity to raise awareness in the topic and demonstrate their capability. They offer you a way of enhancing your knowledge and meeting potential clients and colleagues interested in that subject.

Local employers' associations: It can be quite common for HR Directors and Managers from a particular locality or industry sector to meet regularly to exchange information in confidence. This is less common for other professions. You are unlikely to gain regular access to these meetings unless you are the organiser, but there may be opportunities to offer short presentations on topics of interest to the group.

Self-employed networks: An example is Magenta Circle, which is a national network for self-employed consultants. There are monthly meetings in different locations as well as regular mailings from Nigel Wyatt who founded the Circle. The aim is to facilitate networking and to provide mutual support and learning.

Web: [www.magentacircle.co.uk](http://www.magentacircle.co.uk)

Interim networks: Many of the interim management companies organise events and training sessions for people on their database. These may be free or carry a small charge. They are usually organised around a specific topic, so they provide an opportunity for learning as well as networking with other interims and the staff at the interim company.

Meetings of associates who work for one large consultancy firm: These are typically organised to update associates on issues relating to the firm and the generation of future business. They provide a networking and exchange opportunity with peers and staff at the consultancy firm.

Any training event: Depending on the type of training and who organises the event, the cost and audience is likely to vary considerably. While these are probably best viewed as an investment in your learning, they come with the added bonus of being a networking opportunity.

Charity work: You may choose to offer your time and expertise to a charity, possibly outside your normal working sphere e.g. as a non-executive director, trustee, or volunteer. This can often aid your own development and provide access to a new network.

Exhibitions: These range from specialist exhibitions through to general business exhibitions that may be initiated by the local Chamber of Commerce. They provide an opportunity to meet potential suppliers and customers.

Existing and former employers / clients: They will already be familiar with you, and it is easier to retain existing relationships than starting afresh. It is worth keeping up to date with their issues, offering items that may interest them, and even seeking their advice on a topic if the need arises (most people are happy to help).

Newsletters: These offer a means of maintaining your profile with your target audience, providing they contain items of potential interest.

Email forums and e-clubs: Membership of these is often free. The best way to become part of an on-line community is to contribute regularly. Some mailings can be lengthy, so you may need to be good at scanning and only reading items of likely interest! Some hold local club events. Examples:

Web: [www.UKHRD.com](http://www.UKHRD.com) - daily mailings within the HR / training community.

Web: [www.ebusinessclubs.co.uk](http://www.ebusinessclubs.co.uk) - aims to improve business performance through technology and is managed by the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) with private and public sector support.

## **Finally**

Information about the networks outlined above has been given in good faith. It is however always worth checking out the information for yourself as networks change over time.

If you'd like to learn more about the skills of networking, please take a look at 'Test your networking skills' also included in this series.

I regard networking as fun - an enjoyable process where I can meet people and introduce them to others. I have found this to be immensely rewarding, both for business and on a personal level.

Maureen Ghirelli assists organisations to manage change effectively, particularly when it involves people issues and staff retention. Examples include the implementation of new systems and ways of working, mergers, and relocations. She may be contacted on 01296 730352 or [www.peoplesolutions.biz](http://www.peoplesolutions.biz)