

HDR EMPLOYABILITY GUIDE 5: GUIDE TO NETWORKING (BUILDING CONNECTIONS)

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HIGHER DEGREE BY RESEARCH

EMPLOYABILITY GUIDE 5: GUIDE TO NETWORKING (BUILDING CONNECTIONS)

Networking is a dirty word for many people because (1) they assume it is about making connections to get something out of it (2) they are uncomfortable with self-promotion and (3) they feel like they are selling out and ‘using’ others. If that’s the case, forget the word ‘networking’! Think instead about developing and maintaining professional relationships and building connections both within and beyond your field.

Connecting to other professionals allows both parties to access diverse perspectives, build on collective intelligence and harness potential collaborations for innovation and problem solving (reciprocity). Both parties benefit: you have something to offer and so do they. HDRs offer cutting-edge knowledge that can be valuable to many people.

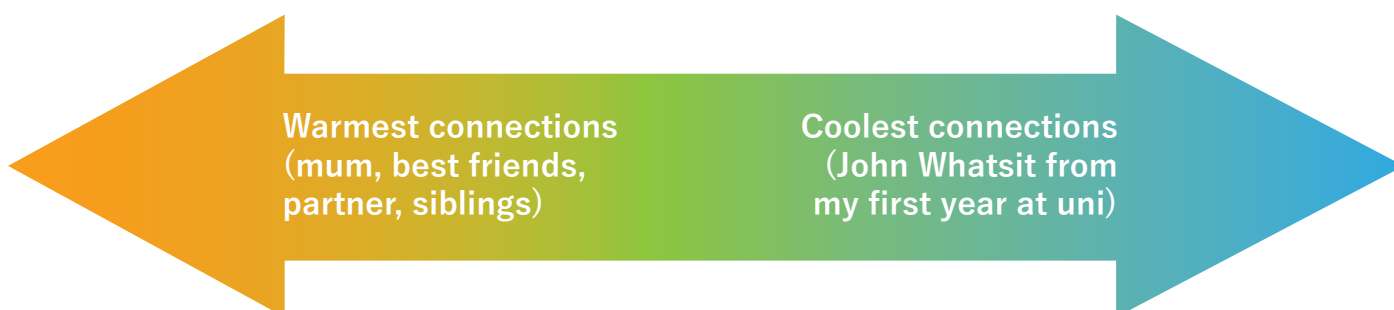
Forming connections requires an attitude of openness (sharing information about you and your work) and genuine curiosity (gaining information about other professionals’ areas of expertise).

On the [Graduate Employability 2.0 project website](#), Ruth Bridgstock notes social networks (connectedness) are central to learning, career development and innovative problem solving (see [Why take a networked approach to graduate employability?](#)). Being professionally connected can benefit your work, deepen and broaden your research and expand its applications. Building professional connectedness also enhances your employability by, for example, increasing your visibility and permeating your brand (see Guide 4).

Types of connections

We all have connections. The people in our lives we are comfortable with and know well are considered our warm connections—for example, friends, family and close colleagues. People we don’t know at all are considered cold connections (note these are excluded in the below figure).

Figure 1: Connections increase or decrease in warmth as your level of comfort with—and closeness to—the person increases or decreases.



Everybody else—from your grade five teacher to the receptionist at your gym—falls somewhere along the spectrum. Of course, these positions on the spectrum are not fixed and will almost certainly move around over time—for example, when you change jobs or move cities.



A word on ‘formality’ or professionalism

Remember, every interaction with a professional connection is a professional interaction—and you therefore need to adopt a stylised version of yourself based on the context and the audience (for example, adapting your language, tone and style). Consider how you act and the language you use with a friend versus your approach when presenting your research at a symposium.

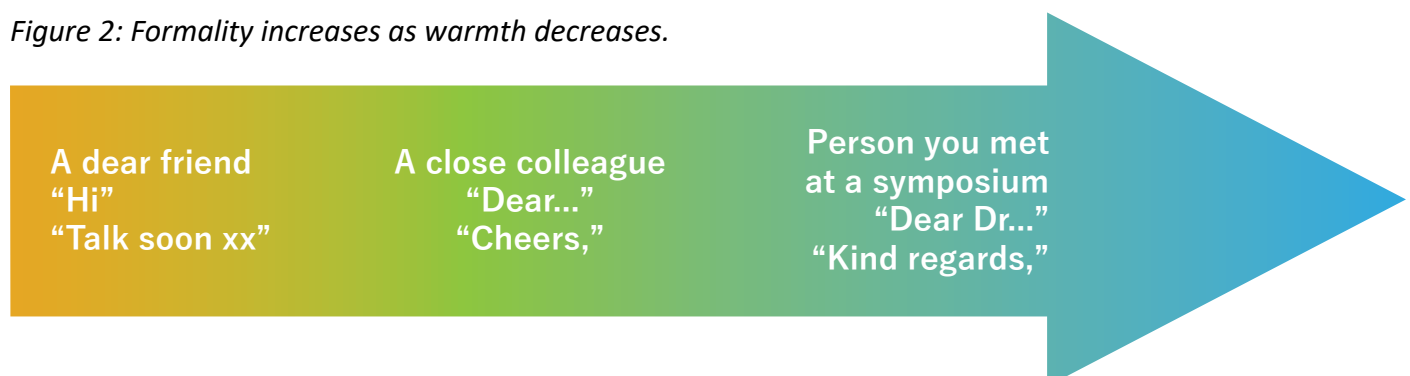
The general rule is to be less formal with warm connections and at social events; and more formal with cold connections and at formal events. However, it may also be appropriate to reflect the language style of the person you are communicating with.

Regardless of the context, you will make a good impression if you are polite and considerate; demonstrate passion and interest in your chosen field or discipline; and show genuine interest in the other person.

These connections may also be referred to as ‘degrees of separation’. This is a measure of the number of links between any two people. For example, there is one degree of separation between you and someone you know; two degrees of separation between you and someone who is a friend of your friend; three degrees of separation between you and someone who is a friend of your friend’s friend and so on.

Targeting people who are two degrees of separation from you is one of the most common approaches for developing new connections. For example, connecting with a fellow HDR student’s supervisor whom you have yet to meet.

Figure 2: Formality increases as warmth decreases.



Getting started: A proactive strategy to develop your networks and build professional relationships

The purpose of this strategy is to (1) identify the connections you would like to make and (2) develop and strengthen these through reciprocity (give and take) and gradually adjusting your approach from a cold /formal outer connection to a warmer/less formal inner connection.

Identifying potential connections

Activity 5.1

Step 1: Note some of your current connections from your inner circles (people you already know and have warm connections with) and identify people they know that you would like to develop a professional connection with (the 'two degrees of separation' group).

Through two degrees of separation

| Current connections | Potential professional connections |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Family, friends and colleagues | Examples: their friends and family; past or present colleagues; industry/government/business connections |
| Supervisors | Examples: their past students; past and present colleagues; fellow members of journal editorial boards |
| Fellow HDR students | Examples: their supervisors; previous supervisors in their honours or master's degree; industry connections; lab groups; past and present colleagues |

Step 2: Expand your exploration and identify professionals you don't know but would like to establish a professional connection with—for example, people who are working or researching in an area that is of interest to you, in similar methodologies and so on (cold connections). Some links have been suggested to help prompt your thinking. During this step you may also realise you actually share some connections with some of these people—if that's the case, add these to the table in the previous step.

Cold connections

| Prompts | Potential connections |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Workplace | Examples: staff within areas of the university that differ to yours (research librarians, statisticians or researchers in other schools /fields); fellow participants in university activities (professional development workshops, sporting/social associations and so on) |
| Events | Examples: experts/professionals you have met in passing (at conferences, professional events and so on) |
| Your discipline area | Examples: experts/professionals you have cited; that are on the editorial boards of key journals in your field; or that you've seen speak at conferences |
| Others | Examples: experts/professionals in other fields distantly related to your research area |

Making contact

For potential connections that are two degrees of separation from you, it is common to ask your mutual connection to introduce you. However, if you don't have access to this you will have to initiate the connection yourself. How you approach each layer of potential connections will differ. The warmer the connection, the more informal (yet still professional) the contact approach.

You might like to practice first with your warm connections—as you will be more comfortable talking, listening, asking for advice and sharing ideas with people you know well. It is a safe place to practice the skill of connecting with people about your professional interests. For example, you might sit around the kitchen table with family and friends discussing each other's career plans and aspirations, offering suggestions and talking through their next steps.

Next, you might contact a colleague or fellow researcher and suggest a time to catch up for coffee, share your research journeys to date and discuss ideas moving forward. Follow up with a thank you and try to include an article, link or book title that might interest them.

A word on digital networking

Online social and professional platforms can be a great way to make initial contact with colder connections and maintain warm connections with regular touch points (comments on blogs, posts and so on).

When making initial contact online, it is important to remember that first impressions count. DO NOT send standard emails or LinkedIn requests. These are often overlooked and quickly dismissed as spam. A simple, tailored request that demonstrates you know something about them and highlights your common interest will move your request out of the delete box and into a connection.

Stretch activity

Identify an expert in your field that you have yet to meet and initiate contact with them. This is your opportunity to make a genuine connection, so don't forget to highlight the benefits of connecting to both parties (what's in it for you and them). A starting point might be a LinkedIn connection request (make sure you personalise it!) or an email inquiry about their research or professional expertise. Remember that your approach with cold contacts should be more formal, focused and professional.



Fostering and developing professional relationships

Activity 5.2 Reflection

Maintain regular contact with your connections; however, be mindful of the other person's time—gauge their enthusiasm about the connection and try to avoid being perceived as needy.

Be courteous, considerate, professional—and always follow through with any actions you've said you would take.

Use digital connections to your advantage. For example, sending a personalised congratulations message when LinkedIn alerts you a connection has changed roles; 'liking' or commenting on their posts will help keep you connected.

Additionally, keep your connections informed of your movements and progress when it comes to significant changes that might impact or benefit them. For example: "I've just started working at X company and I remember your interest in Y topic, so I'd be more than happy to get you some information on Z if you're still researching that area". Note this does not include updates about your progress that has no relevance to them, for example: "I just wanted to let you know that I've finished a full draft of my thesis"!

Activity 5.3 Reflection

Bring to mind a friendship you value and consider the following questions:

- ♦ How did you first meet?
- ♦ What do you do to maintain the friendship?
- ♦ How do you stay connected?
- ♦ What key things happened along the way that shifted the relationship from acquaintance to friendship?
- ♦ How might you apply these steps to developing professional relationships?
- ♦ How might the process differ?

Harnessing face-to-face opportunities to connect

You will have many opportunities to make professional connections and networks through formal (conferences, workshops, professional development and so on) and informal (colleagues, friends, projects, work and so on) channels. Here are some simple strategies to help increase the effectiveness of these opportunities.

Prepare!

It may sound simple; however, preparation is the key to forming good connections. Use your research skills to gain information about the person (their research, their job) and the context where you will meet them. If you are attending a conference, read the list of delegates or presenters to identify people with whom you would like to connect. Think about what you would like to ask them and what you would like them to know about you.

If you find these situations particularly nerve-wracking, try preparing some general topics to chat about (such as the weather, or current sporting events) at the start of the conversation. Also prepare some additional questions to ask if you find you are able to start talking more deeply, such as "What have you found most interesting in your research thus far?".

Adapt to the context

Understanding the context helps you to adjust your approach and style. Try to recognise which times are for social chat and which are more focused.

For example, the opening drinks of a conference is a social event and not the place to bombard people with research. Introduce yourself and ask for a time to discuss research at a later date.

Keep social events social—ask what brought them along to the event or what’s been the most interesting talk so far. Discuss the food; the weather; car parking; sports; movies and so on. Keep questions open to encourage conversation and try to talk positively as people tend to retreat from complainers.

However, many researchers do like talking about their own research—after all, they chose to focus on it for their career! As such, it may be appropriate to ask questions about their research in a conversational way. For example, you might start with “I read your paper on Topic X...” and finish that sentence with: “...how’d you find travelling to Location X for the data collection?” or “...your data collection sounded exhausting! How long did it take you to do all those interviews /models/surveys?! ” or “...it was such an interesting project, are you planning on writing any more articles about it?”. However, you must **gauge the level of enthusiasm** in their responses to inform your decision on whether to ask more questions, change the topic, or even walk away.

Try to avoid talking about your own research unless they ask direct questions about it—don’t ask leading questions so that you can bring up your own work. The key thing is to **listen more than you speak!**

In contrast, discussing research or work-related topics in the context of collaborating or promoting your work is more acceptable in the gaps between conference presentations or during a meeting you have set up.

Read the room

Observe how people are standing and talking together. Avoid trying to join pre-established intimate groups (two people huddled together with closed body language). Enter groups that are standing more apart and looking around, move into the open space between two people and then connect. The key is to observe, hypothesise what might work and it give it a try. “Hi do you mind if I join you? I’m...”.

Tip

During any opportunity to connect, try to gain contact details so you can follow up and begin to build the relationship. Note the event or situation in which you first made contact and what you spoke about so you will have a warm introduction in a follow up email. For example:

“Dear X... It was lovely to meet you at...
I appreciated you taking the time to discuss...
I was fascinated by your views on...
And thought you might be interested in this article/event/Tedtalk etc... Kind Regards...”



Utilise your personal style

Considering the types of conversations you enjoy, how you feel about social events and whether you lean more towards being an introvert or extrovert can help you identify networking strategies that suit your personal style.

For example, you may be more comfortable connecting with only one or two people at a time, having deeper conversations and seeking quality over quantity. Identifying who is attending an event in advance may support this approach: What do they do? Where do they work?

Alternatively, you might prefer a wider approach, larger groups, light introductions and moving on. In this case business cards can be effective so that you can connect on a deeper level at a later date.

You might prefer to collect many contact details at an event and choose who to remain in contact with afterwards, or you might prefer to research attendees before an event and be more targeted with your connecting. Both approaches have value.

If you find networking events overwhelming, taking a friend along might help. But remember to challenge each other to branch out and connect with other attendees.

The key is to work *with* your style rather than *against* it. It's not about the number or the depth of connections you make during an event – it's about the ability to **foster quality connections beyond the event**. Therefore, make sure you manage the number of connections you make at an event to ensure you can (1) find the time to contact them after the conference and (2) remember what you spoke to each person about and therefore follow up accordingly.

Tip

If you collect lots of business cards or have trouble remembering details, writing some brief notes on the cards about the conversation or the person can help prompt your memory after the event.

Notes such as 'send recent journal article' will usually be fine to write while you're still with the person. However, notes such as 'guy in the super bright shirt' should only ever be written after the conversation—preferably in the privacy of your hotel room!

Mind conversation length

This depends on how well you know the person and the context. You will tend to linger with people you know well and have briefer conversations with those you have met for the first time. Be aware of body language. Know when to move on by responding to cues of disengagement: looking away or around the room; short clipped responses; moving further away; reduction in eye contact; not engaging in the conversations or yawning. It's better to thank people and move on than to continue when the conversation has come to a natural end. If you want to talk further, ask if you can contact them later to organise a meeting.

Activity 5.5 Reflection

Bring to mind a time when someone spoke to you in detail about something you have no interest in and consider the following questions:

- ♦ How did you feel?
- ♦ What impression did they leave you with?
- ♦ How did you act?
- ♦ Did you try to change the subject or end the conversation? If so, how?
- ♦ How can you adjust your approach when talking about your research?
- ♦ What checking statements can you use to ensure you are not boring others?

Tip

Set up contact for later to enable a continued relationship beyond the first meeting.

Activity 5.6 Reflection

Recall a time when you met someone who made a positive impression on you and consider the following questions:

- ♦ What did they say and do that engaged you most?
- ♦ What information did they share that left you wanting to know more?

Ask yourself:

- ♦ What is it about me that would be most relevant to the people I am connecting with?
- ♦ What is the benefit of them talking to me?
- ♦ What could I say to leave a positive first impression and engage their interest?

Activity 4.1 in Guide 4 will help you establish a *pitch* rather than just a spiel. You need to have done some research and preparation first to engage in meaningful conversations. Also consider WHAT you want to know—be the listener (without grilling!) and make a link between what you want to know and what you do.



How much is too much when talking about research?

There is no set amount of time—it's about *relevance*! Are you both engaged in similar work or aligned fields and how interested are they in your work? It might feel like your whole world at the moment, but it may not be theirs.

Also consider the context. If the other person is presenting at a conference, there might be a lot of people who want to talk with them. So, briefly introduce yourself and your research and ask if you can contact them in the future. They will probably appreciate your thoughtfulness! Then, when you meet them, you can discuss your research in more detail. Focus on what is common to both of you, what might be beneficial for them to know about your research and what you'd like to know about their research.

Tip

Keep in mind that networking is about being genuine, being authentic and building trust and relationships. It's about establishing strategic quality connections, rather than being a numbers game.

Activity 5.7 Reflection

Think of a time when you talked to someone about your research (or any topic!) and they got a glazed, disinterested look. How did you know? What did you see? How did they act? These are the signs you need to move on.

If you find this reflection challenging, try turning it into an activity: choose a close friend or family member, talk to them at length about something you know they will find boring and consciously note any changes in their behaviour or facial expression!

Follow up

Follow up with relevant contacts by email, a personalised LinkedIn request or a phone call. If you like the personal touch, send them a handwritten note or a card. As a general rule, this should be done after one week but within two weeks. Waiting too long sends a message of disinterest whereas too soon appears 'clingy'.

Start by reminding them where you met, expressing interest in what you talked about or thanking them for their time. Consider if there is any useful information that you can include such as a relevant article from a journal or professional site such as LinkedIn or The Conversation. If you decide to include something, try to make it as relevant as possible by reflecting on your conversation when you connected with them at the event—did they mention any topics they were particularly interested in? Did you mention a method or tool they hadn't heard of? Did they mention any future travel plans? Then organise a follow up meeting or ask to remain in contact in the future.



A final word

Creating and maintaining connections doesn't happen by chance. Having a plan and doing some preparation will help you make the most of opportunities and keep track of ongoing connections. The following table provides a good starting point for this.

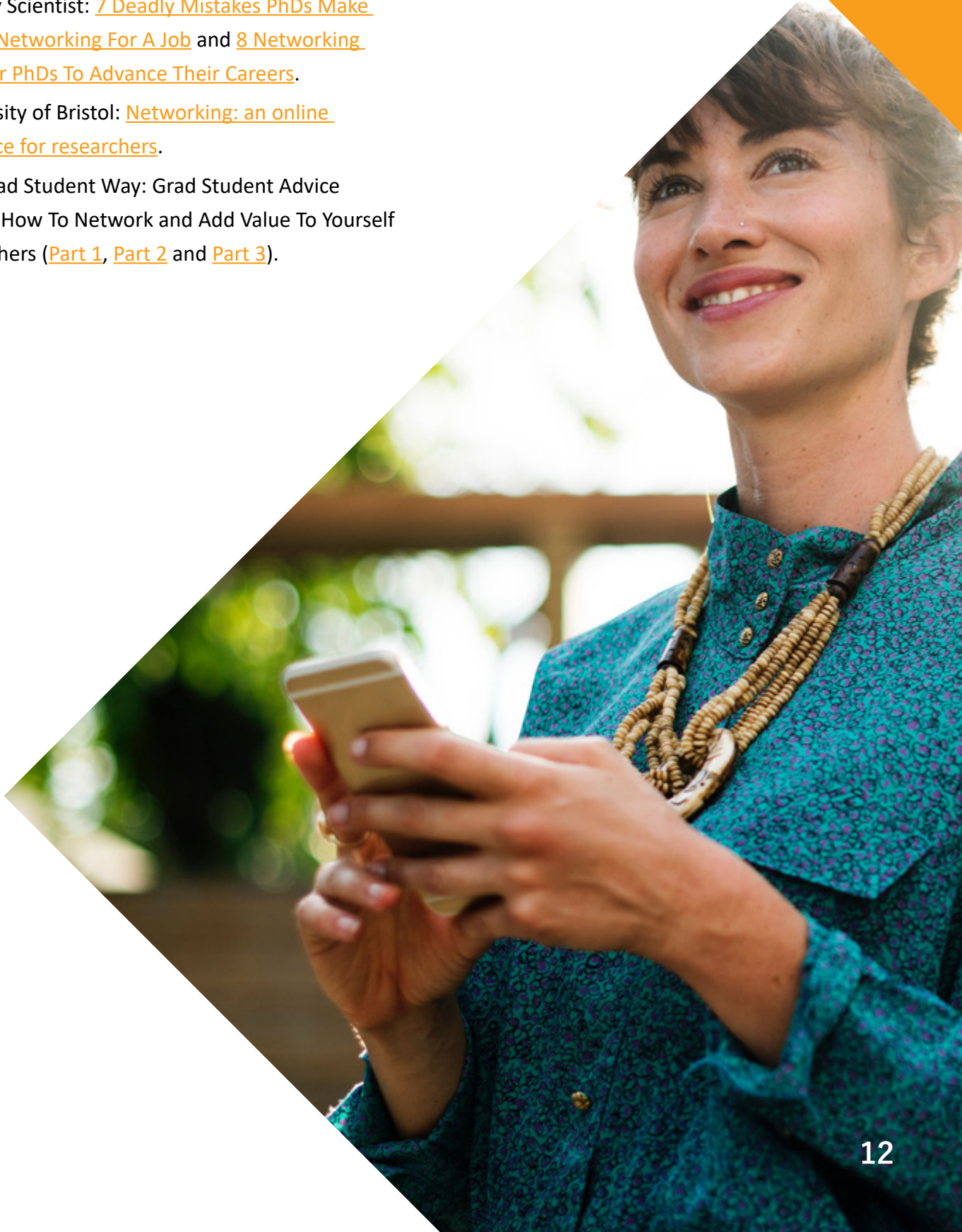
My networking plan

| Who? | How? | When? | What do I want to say /offer? | What do I want to know? | Date complete | Outcome |
|---------------------------------------------|-------|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| Manager of local environmental science firm | Email | First week in January | Researching in the field and considering future career options | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What they enjoy about their job Advice for future | 7/1/19 | Coffee meeting organised |
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Additional information

The following sites also contain helpful information on networking for researchers:

- ♦ The Thesis Whisperer: [How to be the 'star PhD student' – when you are an introvert](#) and [Top five ways to better academic networking](#).
- ♦ The Research Whisperer: [Networking that works](#).
- ♦ Cheeky Scientist: [7 Deadly Mistakes PhDs Make When Networking For A Job](#) and [8 Networking Tips For PhDs To Advance Their Careers](#).
- ♦ University of Bristol: [Networking: an online resource for researchers](#).
- ♦ The Grad Student Way: Grad Student Advice Series: How To Network and Add Value To Yourself and Others ([Part 1](#), [Part 2](#) and [Part 3](#)).



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