

# Building your professional network as a career changer or returning professional

## A National Careers Week perspective

Changing careers or returning to the workforce after time away can feel both exciting and daunting. You may be bringing valuable experience, skills and perspective, yet feel unsure about how to reconnect with the labour market or where to start. One of the most powerful tools available to you during this transition is your **professional network**.

Networking is not about self promotion or asking for favours. It is about building meaningful relationships over time that support learning, confidence and opportunity. For career changers and professionals re-entering the workforce, networking helps bridge the gap between past experience and future direction.

## Why professional networking matters during career transitions

Career change and workforce re-entry are periods of active career development. They involve reassessing skills, values and goals while learning how industries and roles may have shifted. A strong professional network can support this process in practical and personal ways.

Your network can help you:

- gain insight into new or evolving industries
- understand current recruitment expectations
- identify transferable skills you may undervalue
- access opportunities that are not widely advertised
- rebuild professional confidence after time away

From an Australian career development perspective, networking supports informed decision making, adaptability and lifelong learning. These capabilities are particularly important during periods of transition.



## What professional networking really looks like

Professional networking is about forming genuine connections with people who can share knowledge, experience and encouragement. These connections might include:

- former colleagues or supervisors
- people working in industries you are exploring
- mentors who understand career transitions
- peers who are also changing careers or returning to work
- professional association members or community leaders

Your network does not need to be large to be effective. What matters is the quality of relationships and the willingness to engage with curiosity and generosity. Networking works best when it is a two way exchange where learning and support flow in both directions.

## How to rebuild or expand your network

If you have been out of the workforce or are moving into a new field, networking may feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable at first. Starting small and being intentional can make it more manageable.

## Reconnect with people you already know

Let former colleagues, managers or contacts know you are exploring new opportunities or returning to work. Many people are willing to help but may not realise you are ready.

### **Engage with learning and professional spaces**

Short courses, workshops, webinars and professional events provide natural opportunities to meet others while building new skills and confidence.

### **Use online platforms with purpose**

Professional platforms can help you reconnect, follow industry conversations and reach out for informational discussions. Focus on learning and relationship building rather than job requests.

### **Join professional or community organisations**

Professional associations, industry groups and community networks often provide structured ways to connect, learn and contribute.

### **Look beyond your previous role or industry**

Career change often involves drawing on transferable skills. Engaging with people from different sectors can help you see how your experience applies in new contexts.

Networking does not need to happen all at once. It grows through consistent small actions over time.

### **Maintaining and nurturing your connections**

Once you begin rebuilding your network, maintaining relationships becomes just as important as forming them. This might include:

- following up after conversations or events
- sharing articles or information that may be useful
- offering support or introductions where appropriate
- checking in periodically without a specific request

For career changers and returning professionals, nurturing connections helps maintain momentum and confidence. It also reinforces that networking is about contribution and connection, not transaction.

### **Networking in the Australian workforce context**

Australia's labour market values relationships, trust and practical capability. Many opportunities arise through conversation rather than formal advertisement. This makes networking especially important for those navigating change or re entry.

Networking can be particularly empowering for people who may feel disconnected from current workplace norms including parents returning after caring responsibilities, people recovering from illness, migrants building local experience, or professionals shifting industries. Building connections helps restore visibility and confidence while expanding access to opportunity.

### **A National Careers Week message**

National Careers Week reminds us that careers are not linear. Change, pause and reinvention are normal parts of working life. Building and maintaining a professional network supports these transitions by creating connection, insight and possibility.

If you are changing careers or returning to the workforce, start with one conversation. Approach networking as a learning opportunity rather than a task. Over time, these connections can become one of the most valuable supports in your career journey.

