

# Ultimate PhD Networking Guide: How To Create Opportunities Out Of Thin Air (Part 2)

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## Part 1: [Grad Student Advice Series: How To Network and Add Value To Yourself and Others](#)



I stared at the computer screen. I knew no one outside of academia. I thought about setting up a LinkedIn Profile but didn't see the point. A feeling of hopelessness set in. I heard about the importance of networking before but didn't know what to do or how to take those first steps.

I signed up on LinkedIn despite my complacency and skepticism. I said to myself, "Like this will change anything." This is supposed to do what for me exactly?

I stared at the screen. **ZERO contacts**. I knew of a handful of people I could add, but very few who actually knew of my accomplishments and personally knew me outside of academia (or who I worked with closely in a different field). A few professors maybe and a few people I worked with during a summer internship a while back. Sure I had my thesis committee. But I thought "they will probably just want to write me a letter to do a post-doc (at least that is the respectable and 'expected' thing to do upon graduation)." Beyond that, the only people I knew were the ones I've met at conferences, seminars, joint lab meetings, presentations, or just networking on campus.

The number of contacts just sat there. I had maybe 25 or 30 tops after about a month or so. I didn't know where to go, until a friend told me about the importance of informational interviews.

What is an informational interview? I didn't have a clue. I said "Yeah right. People will actually take time out of their day to talk to me? About what?"

I'll tell you one thing: **The Ultimate Networking Tool Is An Informational Interview**. I don't care if you are a graduate student or a post-doc.

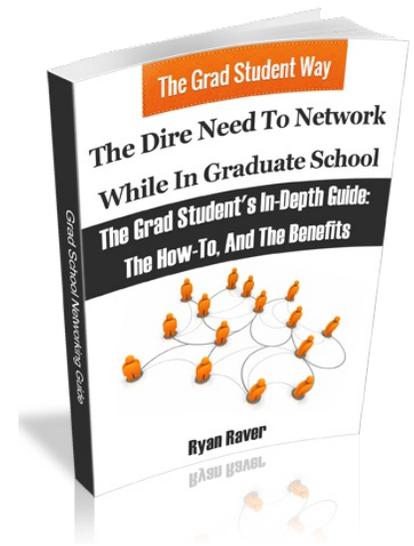
Networking is about information exchange right? **The real goal is to**

**provide information about yourself and gather information about other professionals and potential opportunities.** So let's get into exactly how I used informational interviews to "create a network out of thin air" in a short amount of time.

**A lot of PhDs don't know what they want to do past the PhD stage simply because they lack information.** I was one of them.

I also didn't see the value in a PhD until I started networking. In all honesty, I wanted to drop out with a Master's degree. But **informational interviews saved my PhD.**

You can't get enough credible information by just sitting behind a computer screen and reading about what someone in industry is doing. Or by talking to people who are in academia and have never been OUTSIDE of academia or had any working experience/knowledge (a lot of professors will even have skewed perceptions about what industry is all about, career prospects, and **what matters beyond grad school**). The best way to find out is to TALK TO THAT PERSON. Plus, once you learn about one position you may become interested in another or learn about different paths/transitions to take.



- Most senior-level employees believe that there is intrinsic value in having connections and facilitating connections. It's a cheap, relatively easy way to make the world a better place, and they consider their actions "paying it forward." They know that new opportunities can be created—all by giving up a few minutes of their time.

- "Opportunity hires" occur even during a hiring freeze or in companies that have recently downsized. This happens when no specific opening exists and yet good people surface via informational interviews. So it makes good sense for both parties to reach out for informational interviews; for you, having a personal connection means you'll be in a better position for a job interview invitation; and for them, the possibility exists that you'll be a great "find."

Source: [Tooling Up: The Informational Interview](#)

## Step 1: Set up your LinkedIn Profile

Some things that may seem "obvious" aren't obvious in reality, because I see people miss some of the most basic and important practices. **Have a catchy headline that tells who you are.** This shouldn't be some boring title like "Graduate Student at UW-Madison" or "Manager at Company X." That doesn't tell me anything about who you are and the value that you bring to the table. Don't be afraid to make it a sales-pitch here.

Your summary should have important points without lengthy paragraphs. Tell people the highlights of what you have done. Make it stand out. Talk about what you are interested in doing (your informational interviews and corresponding positions will match up with the field(s) of interest you list here). If you want to talk about any special skills, specialties or interests, now is your chance!



Your LinkedIn Profile is basically your **online resume**. If you have a polished resume, it is as simple as copying and pasting. If you don't have a resume, well you better get to work. Because networking without having a resume (if asked for or if you want to offer it for feedback -I'll mention this in Step 4) will only leave you empty-handed for potential future opportunities.

You don't have to do everything at once like get recommendations or endorsements. People worry about needing to have a complete LinkedIn Profile right off the bat. The important thing right now is to focus on your informational interview strategy, not on having an A+ LinkedIn profile with 500+ connections. After all, **quality beats quantity**. You must have the basics to make contact (and start doing informational interviews), but you will build as you go. You don't have to join 50 groups all in one day.

Join LinkedIn Discussion Groups and be an active participant. You will establish an online reputation and it will get you noticed. If you have a professional blog, even better (see below-only 18% of those surveyed actually have a professional website and only 2% have a professional blog).

Going further, you can even have people contact/message you for possible collaborations or value opportunities via LinkedIn Discussion Groups. Either way, you are getting your name out there. One group I actively participate in is "PhD Careers Outside of Academia." Also, keep in mind that some LinkedIn Discussion Groups will even have internal job postings that aren't available elsewhere (you'll have to find the ones specific to your field).

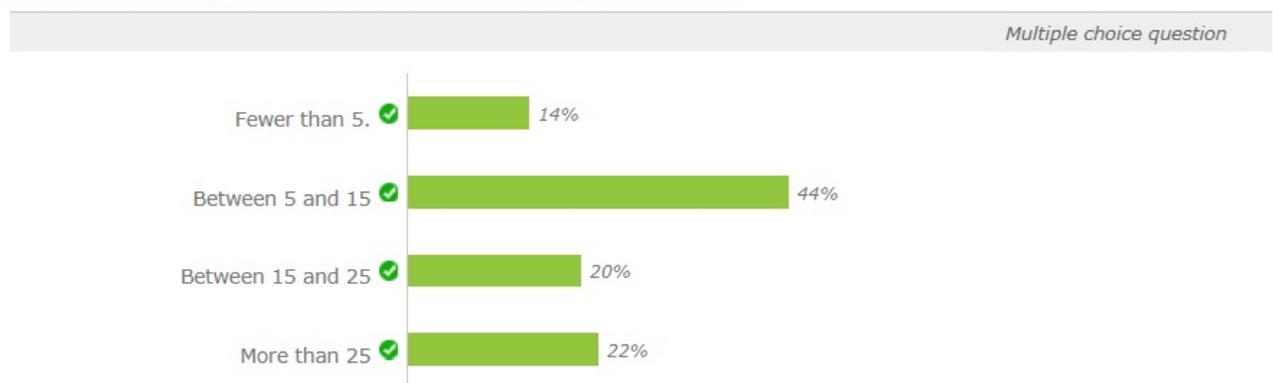
## Statistics That Should Concern You

Based on a survey by [dougsguides](#), the need to network and have a professional blog is imminent:

**44% of people surveyed ONLY have a network between 5 and 15 people! That's almost half!**

**How big is your network? (Your network is the number of people you know who can help, advise, or support you in your job hunting activities. It includes people working in your chosen field, professors, and other students).**

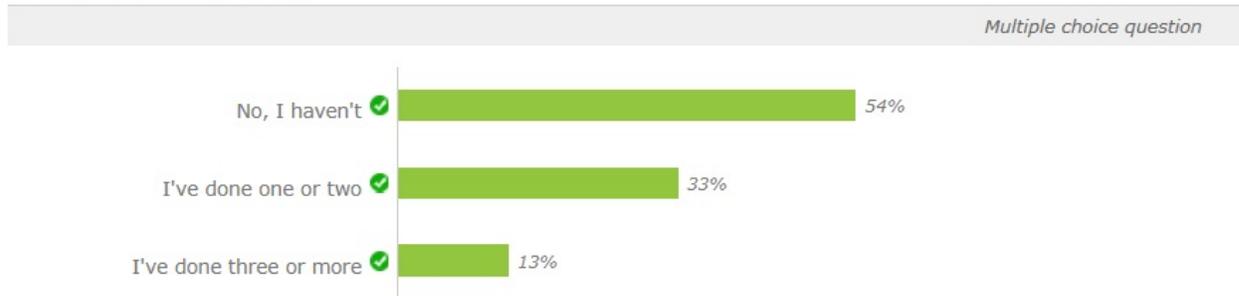
*Forty-two percent of the respondents have more than 15 people in their professional network! Another 44% have between 5 and 15. Having a strong network increases your chances of getting a job by 2-10x. If you are at the low end of the range, **follow this advice to build your network.***



**Only 13% of those surveyed have done three or more informational interviews! More strikingly, a whopping 54% have never even done an informational interview!**

**Have you done any informational interviews? (An informational interview is an interview with someone working in your field of interest with the goal of getting information, not getting a job.)**

Unfortunately, the majority of students (54%) haven't done any informational interviews and another 33% have only done one or two. Informational interviews are the best way to understand what skills are needed in a job, what kinds of jobs are available, and who's hiring. **(Here are some sample questions to ask during an informational interview.)**

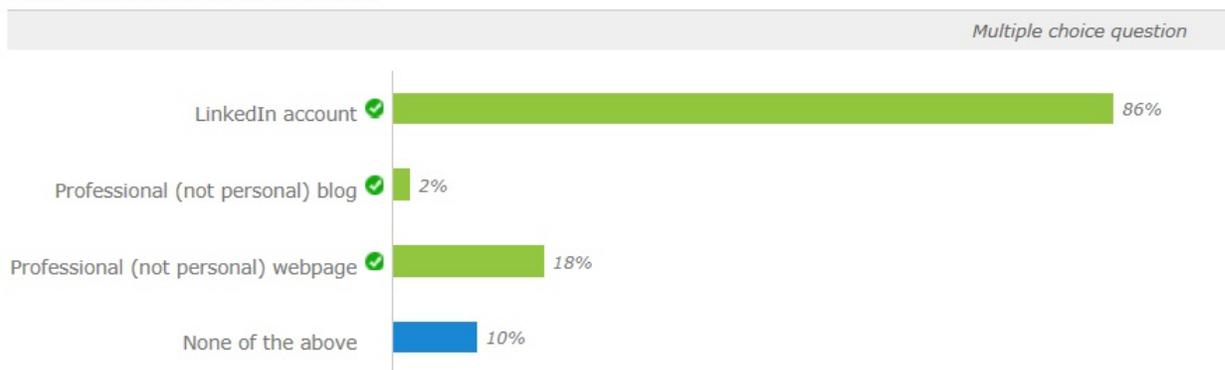


**86% of those surveyed already have a LinkedIn Profile But Most Likely Don't Know How to Use It!**

**And, Only 18% have a Professional Website and Only 2% have a Professional Blog!!**

**Which of the following do you have? (Check all that apply)**

Wow - 86% of the students are already on LinkedIn and 18% have a professional webpage! There's no doubt that LinkedIn is becoming a business necessity. **You can differentiate yourself if you start blogging**, since only 2% of the respondents have a one:



**So what are you doing to stand out from the crowd? Do you have a professional blog? Do you have a LinkedIn Profile that you are actually using? Are you doing Informational Interviews? Are you building your network that a lot of graduate students and post-docs are lacking? Do you lack career direction or marketable skills that allow you to cross over to alternative PhD careers?**

## **Step 2: Start Making Contact (Getting the Ball Rolling with your Existing Network)**

**Hit up your Number #1 contact.** What I mean by that is the **most well-connected person that you know**. This could be a professor on campus. The first thing to do is go through their network on LinkedIn and look at their connection list. Then pick your **top 5 contacts** that they have listed. Don't just go with all the same positions (or one company). For example, I picked Scientist, Field Application Scientist, Product Manager, CEO, Sales Rep, etc.

**Set up an informational interview with your "key" contact.** Ask to be introduced to the **top 5 contacts**

that they know (if they don't know your top 5 "personally" then ask for them to make alternate suggestions or meet with more than one key contact). Aim for someone high-up position wise. Why? Because once you start following the emerging network that will spiderweb via introductions, chances are if you stick with people who are more experienced and high-up position wise, they are more likely to keep the ball rolling for you (based on more high-up introductions). If the person is new at their position or at the lower-end (less connected) of the company you may reach a dead-end sooner.

If you don't have time to set up an informational interview with your key contact (or they are in a different city), then you do it via email or LinkedIn. Your message should say something like:

*Dear Dr. \_\_,*

*I am a X year PhD Student (or post-doc) and I am starting to explore careers outside of academia. Therefore, I am conducting informational interviews to learn more about these potential opportunities. After doing some of my own research, I found fields 1, 2, and 3 of interest to me. I saw that Person X was in your professional network and was wondering if you wouldn't mind introducing me to that person so that I could conduct an informational interview? I would greatly appreciate it. Thanks for your time.*

*Regards,*

*Signed You*

The hardest part is getting started. But once your key contact introduces you to those top 5 people (or however many you see fit), it will spiderweb to an endless network. A lot of times that person may be out of town or won't respond right away. You can follow up a second time. If you still get silence, then move on. Don't annoy the person.

**Ideally, these top 5 contacts (which stem from your initial key contacts) should be in your area (nothing beats face-to-face contact), but if you are looking to move or build your network elsewhere- do a phone interview instead.**

If you "run dry", lack initial key well-connected contacts (like I did), or want to expand further (as I would suggest/recommend anyways), proceed to step 3.

### **Step 3: Start Making Cold Contacts (Optional)**

The first informational interview I ever did (officially) outside of academia was done and set up cold. Keep in mind that Step 2 is the most ideal step and best way to start since introductions get things done faster and are more credible (and you are more likely to get a response). **Do step 3 if you want to branch out to different contacts and different companies or expand on talking to people in certain positions that your current network is not acquainted with** (maybe there are top 5 companies in your area that you are really interested in learning about or even working for).



I went on LinkedIn and typed in “Field Application Scientist” (as an example). I found a huge list of people. So I narrowed it down to people JUST within my area (Madison, WI). I am fortunate enough to live in a city with over a 100+ biotech companies. So everyone’s situation may be different. But, from there I messaged my top 3 picks (you can do more if you wish: up to 5 or 10 which will depend on your schedule and how aggressive you want to be-if you aren’t getting responses you can increase the number to however you see fit).

I worded the message similar to Step 2:

*Hi (Insert name of person),*

*I did a search for ‘\_\_(Insert Position)\_\_\_’. Your name came up in the search on LinkedIn. I was wondering if you would be willing to conduct an informational interview? The \_\_\_\_\_ track is a career I was interested in pursuing and I was hoping to learn more about it. If you would be willing to meet in person that would be much appreciated. I am currently a PhD graduate student at \_\_\_\_\_. There are numerous questions I had about whether this position was a good transition in order to be able to move away from the lab bench and go more into \_\_\_\_\_. Please get back to me at your earliest convenience. I look forward to hearing from you. Thanks for your time.*

*Regards,*

*Me*

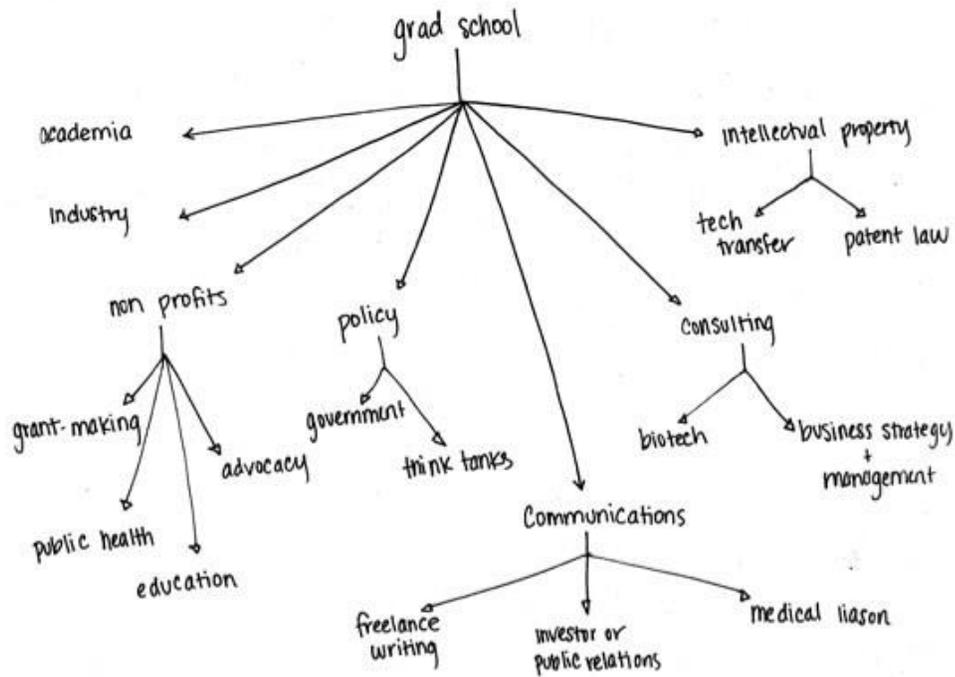
Does it actually work? Yes. It’s not 100% but guess what? **They were once graduate students too** (assuming you pick someone with a Master’s or PhD). They know of your situation! They know what you’re going through because most likely they went through the same thing. That is why 60% or more of the time they will respond and most will agree to take at least 30 minutes out of their day to speak with you. My success rate was 75% or more at first. But it led to almost 100% after the cold contacts introduced me to the people that they knew (it no longer become cold-the first initial contacts were cold then it was no longer viewed in this manner). **If the person isn’t available in-person, then do it over the phone.**

But I didn’t stop at Field Application Scientist. After I did the informational interviews with FAS’s, I noticed that they mentioned this type of position as being a stepping-stone. So I learned more about the types of roles they transitioned into. So I followed the dots. One example of this was going into Marketing or Product Management. I’ve also spoken with people who were at the laboratory bench and moved away from it. **I asked them how they made the transition and if they were happy with their decision.** I’ll get to the questions in Step 4.

The career path that you wish to learn about and/or pursue is uniquely up to you and your interests. Therefore, choose your interviews and network contacts accordingly.

### **Still stuck?**

This should get you started:




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## Part 3 Releases 4/1/13 (Click to Skip Ahead-I suggest waiting and digesting all the material)

Includes:

Step 4: Start Asking The Right Questions (Questions to Ask) + My Story

Step 5: Follow Up, Offer Value, and Stay In Contact

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### Further Reading:

- 1) Part 1: [Grad Student Advice Series: How To Network and Add Value To Yourself and Others](#)
- 2) [Do Your Research: Find Your Future Career Interest On PhD Career Guide](#) or [BLS.gov](#)
- 3) Check out [PhD Branching Points](#) and [Versatile PhD](#)
- 4) [Tooling Up: The Informational Interview](#)

