



**A**s an industry professional reaches out for a handshake, your pulse immediately skyrockets and heart begins pounding, you become scatterbrained and unsure of where the next conversation could lead. You are not alone.

Professional networking is often viewed as stressful and uncomfortable. Looking past the awkward conversations and handshakes, rest assured, networking is a vital tool for job success.

Jared Lay, assistant director at the Texas Tech University Career Center and the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources liaison, said creating contacts through networking is crucial.

“It’s not what you know, it’s who you know,” Lay said. “While you are in college you must build your base and grow your contacts.”

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 70 percent of all jobs are found through networking.

Networking unlocks the hidden job market. Southern Methodist University reported that many jobs are never made public and are filled by word-of-mouth and referrals.

Lay said an initial contact with an employer could lead to a job with their company or even a different company.

“Today you have Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn,” Lay said. “You have all of these resources to help you build a better network.”

Harvard Business Review attests that networking is now a permanent, round-the-clock personal branding campaign.

Students are responsible for maintaining their image online and in person. Students should brand themselves as public experts by tweeting, blogging and maintaining their social media norms with information related to their future career goals.

Although social networking has proven to aid in job searches, it should accompany traditional networking opportunities.

Bloomberg Businessweek reported that despite enhanced search engines and social media, technology in general can have negative effects on the job search. Bloomberg Businessweek suggests that even in the digital age, person-to-person networking plays a critical role in landing a job.

Using every possible situation to network is important, and Lay said students should do more than participate in one or two activities in college. Students should be researching, participating in student organizations, going to conferences and visiting their university career center.

“Always be yourself, act natural, always give a good handshake and be sincere when you are talking to potential employers,” Lay said. “If you’re asking about a job they might have in their company, look them in the eyes.”

To get the most out of a network experience, Lay said students should ask for business cards and write follow-up letters to the employers they just met.

Skylar Sowder, a senior agricultural and applied economics major from Sudan, Texas, said even when a student has all of the resources to network successfully, it can still be challenging.

“Networking can be intimidating,” Sowder said, “but you just have to get over being nervous or scared.”

Sowder said confidence comes from practice, and if a student never makes the first steps in networking, they may never overcome that anxiety.

“Connections are everything,” Sowder said. “Once you get past the awkward stages, it’s also really fun to meet new and interesting people.”

Trevor White, a recent graduate of the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, said he also faced challenges in networking as an undergraduate. White said students should begin building a diverse network and attempt to break out of their comfort zone.

“It is not easy to do,” said White, an associate lobbyist with Combest, Sell and Associates in Washington, D.C., “but it is very important to branch out.”

White said it was easier transitioning into a full-time career because of the contacts he made through networking as an undergraduate. He said he knows more people and has a strong support system.

Successful networking should not necessarily feel like networking. White said he rarely intentionally participates in networking. Instead, he attempts to meet people and make a good first impression in hopes of developing that contact down the road.

White said it is also important to not push new connections too quickly because it could strain the professional relationship.

“Get to know the person and let them get to know you,” White said. “Eventually, the connections you build will bear fruit.”

