Networking & Assessment Centres – how to make a positive lasting impression

This guide is part of the Applications and Interviews series. For more guides in the series please visit the website below.

Careers & Employability Service
www.mmu.ac.uk/careers/guides
Attending assessment centres and networking event can be a nerve-wracking prospect and the thought of formal dining and chitchat with strangers can send shivers down the spines of the most confident of students. And yet social adeptness is easily learnt and is a skill valued by employers (especially if a role involves client interactions) so knowing how to make a good impression when networking or in assessment situations can be the deal breaker that lands you the job. This guide will explain how to make a positive lasting impression.

NETWORKING EVENTS

When networking professionally, the purpose of your conversation is to elicit key information or useful advice regarding the jobs market, industry sector or profession that you are interested in entering. Go to ‘Structure of a Conversation’ section below for useful networking conversations topics.

Introductions

At networking events, the aim is to talk to as many people as possible so it is fine to introduce yourself and to move away once a conversation is exhausted.

- When being introduced to someone, first look at the introducer and then at the person you are meeting and - if offered - shake hands.
- If someone approaches you, then immediately give that person your full attention
- If you wish to meet someone approach them from the front so that they can see you coming, avoid tapping their shoulder or theatrically clearing your throat.

Names - techniques to help you remember names:

- Listen carefully to their name and repeat it in conversation as soon as possible
- Silently repeat it
- If unsure, ask them to repeat it. – But you can only do this once!

Moving on if you want to get away, you need to do this politely and take into account that all people need acknowledgment and closure with their dealings with others. It is rude to bolt or just say: ‘I have to go’ and walk away; instead have a half empty glass so you can say: ‘I think I’ll go to the bar for a refill, it was nice speaking to you’ or ‘that food looks delicious, I think I’ll try some’. If others have joined your conversation and it is not possible to say goodbye without interrupting things it is still important to make some kind or parting gesture, eye contact, a smile or a wave.

CONVERSATIONS

Being good at small talk is an impressive asset. It will create the impression that you are a relaxed and confident person and prospective employers will consider that you would be an excellent member of a team especially if your future role involves client contact. The good news is that you can learn how to be a good conversationalist and here’s how…

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• Listening – enables you to pick up on nuggets of conversation said by others so you can get or keep a conversation going.
• Prompting - ask people about themselves, and ask open ended questions that are not answered with a simple yes or no.
• Be curious – it is always pleasant to meet somebody who appears interested in who you are and what you have to say.
• Ask intelligent questions and really listen to the answers
• Try not to talk too quickly or too slowly.

Body Language
• Look at the person, lean forward slightly, nod or say ‘I see’ or ‘yes’. If you are uncomfortable, looking into the eyes of another person try the Cyclops approach of looking at a point immediately between their eyebrows – but don’t stare fixedly, shift your gaze occasionally.
• Avoid folding your arms as it appears you are not an open person, avoid slouching or standing to attention and keep your hands away from your hair and face.

Irritants
• Interruption - if you have something to contribute, no matter how witty, wait for a pause.
• Boredom - no matter how disinterested you may be in what the other person is saying don’t allow yourself to become distracted by what is happening elsewhere in the room; good manners often requires extra effort.
• Profanity, blasphemies or vulgarity – avoid!
• Slang – don’t use expressions that are obscure or offensive and don’t pepper your conversation with obscure words, technical jargon or foreign phrases.

Confidence
• Always speak about yourself and your achievements with pride. Never be apologetic about anything as self-deprecation has a dampening effect on a conversation. How can the other person speak with enthusiasm and pride about their job, qualifications and achievements if you have just denigrated your own?

Humour
• A sense of humour is good to break the ice. Real life stories particularly about familiar and famous people are often better than jokes. Whatever you do, don’t tell long, shaggy dog jokes and never tell vulgar or sexually explicit jokes. Sarcasm and irony are fine so long as the object of the remarks is remote enough from the lives of those who are listening.

THE STRUCTURE OF A CONVERSATION - Start with small talk and build up to more in-depth topics

Small Talk - Conversational clichés such as the weather can be relied upon after all, they became clichés because they are so useful. Here are a few safe topics:

• Weather
• Current light news events
• A funny or light hearted film you have just seen
• A well-known company merger, expansion or relocation
• The latest heroic or miserable showing of a sports team
• A great restaurant you have discovered
• What band or singer or show is on tour and if it will be possible to get tickets
• Holidays – show interest in travel (it may be part of the job) but don’t be so enthusiastic that you give the impression that once you have saved up enough money you intend to be off backpacking round Australia!

More in-depth topics:
• What do you do during a typical day in your job?
• What is the aspect of your job that you enjoy the most?
• What is the most fascinating piece of work that you have ever undertaken?
• How is the company developing and responding to modern challenges?
• What skills, qualifications and qualities are vital for getting into the field and for getting promoted?
• How is the profession changing?
• What kind of work culture exists in your organisation? What kind of people seem to thrive there?
• What sort of person is suited to a career in your field?
• What entry level jobs are best for learning about the job and for getting ahead? How would these be filled normally?

What to avoid:
• Bad news such as aeroplane crashes
• Religion
• Politics and philosophy
• Your health or lack of it
• The faults or misfortunes of others
• Money – salaries and bonuses, cost of house etc

Common signs of boredom (if spotted change topic or move away)
• Your listener’s eyes glaze over
• They look away or watch their shoes
• It occurs to you that you have been the only one speaking for the last few minutes
• You hear yourself using technical or obscure terms
• You notice that you are the only one laughing or even smiling at what you thought were the witty parts of your story
• You hear yourself repeating or rambling

ASSESSMENT CENTRES

Social events at assessment centres, are hardly ever truly ‘social’ and be aware that during the tea break, buffet lunch or formal dinner, the assessors or graduate trainees that you mix with are likely observing you. They will be looking at your overall social & communication skills and your ability to mix and network with others.

The Buffet - This is a chance to mingle with your prospective employers and make small talk. Your main aim at this occasion is not to eat but rather to drift around and chat with lots of people; the food is merely a prop.
Avoid:

- Pushing in or swimming against the tide to speed your journey through the buffet table - be patient and wait in the queue along with everyone else. It is a time to chat and introduce yourself
- Using your fingers to put food on your plate - use the serving utensils
- Starting to eat whilst still in the queue
- Putting too much food on your plate - going back for seconds or thirds is perfectly acceptable and allows you to mingle
- Scraping and stacking your plate when you're finished
- Standing in a place where you are blocking a path to the buffet table or toilets
- Eating different courses together - prawns, salad and chocolate cake piled onto your plate all at once may make others feel ill
- Your mobile ringing

**Formal Dinner** - At some assessment centres part of the selection process takes place in the evening where you are asked to attend a formal dinner. Don't be dismayed, read the tips below so you can sit and chat with confidence without panicking about which knife and fork to use.

**Table Settings**

- Use the cutlery in the order in which you find it, working from the outside in towards your plate
- Avoid waving or thrusting your cutlery to emphasise a conversational point
- Your napkin belongs unfolded on your lap, don't elaborately flap or wave it when unfolding it
- If you leave the table put the napkin on your chair and push the chair close to the table
- Hold white wine glasses by the stem (to keep the wine cooler) and red wine glasses by the bowl (the warmth of your hand enhances the flavour of the wine)

**General Decorum at the dinner table**

- Avoid slouching and leaning or putting your elbows on the table
- If you take medication do so without comment, no explanation is necessary
- Keep all belongings such as keys, glasses, notebook off the table - If it isn't part of the meal it shouldn't be there
- Put your handbag and briefcase under your chair
- Never chew with your mouth open or gulp food down
- Don't speak with food in your mouth no matter how much you want to inject a brilliant observation at a critical moment
- If eating bread first put a piece of butter on your plate, then break off a bite-size piece of bread and butter this. Don't butter an entire piece of bread or roll
- If you are asked to pass the salt or pepper, always keep the two together and set them down on the table within reach of the person making the request
- People dining together should start and finish at roughly the same time so pace yourself so you are in sync as you don't want to finish ahead of everybody else or lag behind. If you find you have fallen behind, stop talking so you catch up

**Dining Accidents**

- Don't panic! Act calmly and if possible cheerfully
• If you spill something, don’t dramatise the incident by jumping up or yelling ‘watch out’. If you are in danger of getting wet back away from the table and blot with a napkin
• If you spill something on someone else, apologise calmly and then offer to pay for whatever cleaning is needed. Don’t touch the other person, instead let the victim handle the blotting and/or wiping, offer your napkin and ask the waiter for replacements and don’t make the incident the next topic of conversation

You are now equipped to make the most of any social event without fear of standing out for all the wrong reasons. Learn to enjoy such events and remain relaxed, calm and confident at all times.

We hope you found this guide useful. The Careers & Employability Service offers a wide range of support to help you make a career choice, prepare for your future, improve your employability skills and find employment.

Did you know?
- MMU students can use the Careers & Employability Service throughout your time at university and up to 3 years after your course finishes.
- We offer drop-in advice and bookable appointments in Manchester and in Crewe.

Explore our extensive website and the full range of career guides at www.mmu.ac.uk/careers/guides

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