



# The Summer Networking Challenge

*A Participant Guide*

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## About This Guide

This summer, I'm running a personal networking challenge, and I'd love for you to join me.

The challenge works in any season and over any timeframe you choose. I decided to do this over the summer because it reminded me of my childhood library's summer reading challenge. What matters is picking a goal, setting a deadline, and actually doing it.

This guide walks you through why this is worth your time, how to set up the challenge, where to find people to talk to, and how to structure the conversations.

## The Challenge

Set a deadline by which you will have conducted a predetermined number of 30-minute one-on-one conversations with people outside your existing circles. Tell someone your goal and ask them to check in on you before the deadline.

That's it. The rest of this guide is about how to make those conversations worth having.

A few parameters worth setting from the start:

- New means people you don't already know well.
- One-on-one means a real conversation, not a comment exchange or a group event.
- Outside your existing circles means a deliberate push beyond the people who already know your name and your work.

**Let's get started!**



## Why Networking Feels Uncomfortable (And How to Change That)

Most people find networking uncomfortable, and the discomfort usually has a specific source. When you approach a conversation as someone who needs something, the other person can feel it. The dynamic becomes transactional before anyone has said anything interesting.

Instead, go in curious and looking to give. Start with genuine interest in the other person. What are they working on? What's hard right now? How did they get where they are? When your interest is real, the discomfort mostly disappears, because you're no longer performing. You're just talking to someone.

And when you enter the conversation asking yourself how you can be of service to the other person, it helps you listen for ways you can make a difference. This reorientation will take your networking from something that feels uncomfortable to something more natural and even fun.

## Why Broadening Your Network Matters

In 1973, sociologist Mark Granovetter published research arguing that, when it comes to new opportunities and ideas, casual acquaintances—what he called weak ties—are often more valuable than close relationships.<sup>1</sup> This is because your close network tends to know what you know, move in the same circles you move in, and see the same landscape you see. Your weak ties, on the other hand, connect you to entirely different worlds.

That finding has held up. A 2022 study by researchers at Stanford, MIT, Harvard, and LinkedIn analyzed LinkedIn data and confirmed that weak ties remain instrumental in career mobility and opportunity, even in a digital environment where connection is theoretically frictionless.<sup>2</sup>

Most people's networks are narrower than they realize. They're deep in one industry, one career stage, and one geography. This challenge is designed to change that.

## Finding People to Talk To

The most common obstacle to networking is knowing where to start. Here are some concrete places to look for new connections:

- **Ask people who know your work.** Tell a trusted colleague, client, or mentor what you're trying to do and ask who they think you should know. People who know you well are often better at identifying useful connections because they can see your blind spots.
- **Use LinkedIn as a search tool.** Most people use LinkedIn passively. For this challenge, use it actively. Search by industry, role, geography, or shared affiliation. Look at who your contacts are connected to. Second-degree connections are often the most useful starting point.
- **Look to your alumni network.** A shared alma mater is a surprisingly durable reason to reach out to a stranger. Many alumni networks have directories or regional chapters that make this easier. You can also use the Alumni function of your college or university's LinkedIn page.
- **Think about your civic and professional associations.** Fellow board members, committee members, and association colleagues are often underleveraged. You may already have a relationship with them in one context and have never had a real conversation outside of it.
- **Revisit loose connections.** You've already established a thread with former colleagues, people you met once at a conference, and connections you made and never followed up with. Pull on it.
- **Pay attention to thoughtful posts on social media in your field.** When someone writes something worth reading or asks a good question in a public forum, that's a reason to reach out.

A note on networking events: they are useful for generating leads, not for the conversations themselves. A good event might give you three or four people worth following up with. Those follow-up conversations are what count toward your goal, not the event itself.

## Reaching Out

Here are two templates to get you started: one for someone you know or have met before, and one for someone you're contacting cold. Both templates work for email or LinkedIn. Adapt the wording to fit your voice, but resist the urge to over-explain. A brief, direct message gets a better response rate than a long one.

### Reaching out to someone you know or have met:

Hi [name], I've been thinking about broadening my network and you came to mind as someone I'd genuinely enjoy talking with. Would you have thirty minutes for a conversation in the next few weeks? I'm happy to work around your schedule.

### Reaching out to someone you don't know:

Hi [name], I came across your work through [where you found them] and it resonated with me. I'm not looking to sell you anything or ask for a favor. I'm simply trying to expand my network and have conversations with people doing interesting work. Would you be open to a thirty-minute call or coffee in the next few weeks?

## How to Meet

In person is always the best option when it's available. Even a thirty-minute coffee creates a quality of connection that's hard to replicate on a screen. If you're in the same city as someone you want to meet, default to in person.

When geography makes that impractical, video is meaningfully better than phone. Being able to see someone's face changes the quality of the conversation. Reserve phone calls for people who genuinely prefer them or for follow-up conversations with someone you've already met.

## What to Say Once You're There

These four questions are a reliable starting point:

- **What are you working on right now?** This is the most useful opening question because it lets the other person talk about whatever is top of mind for them. It almost always leads somewhere interesting.
- **What's the hardest part of your work these days?** People don't get asked this enough. A genuine answer tells you more about someone than their LinkedIn profile ever will, and it creates the conditions for a real conversation.
- **How did you get here?** Ask this when someone has an unusual or nonlinear path. Most people have a more interesting story than their resume suggests, and this question gives them room to tell it.
- **Is there anyone you think I should talk to?** Ask this at the end of a good conversation. When you've been genuinely engaged, it's a natural question, and it often opens doors you wouldn't have found on your own.

You don't need all four questions in every conversation. One good question, asked with real curiosity, is enough.

## How to Enhance the Challenge

The goal of this challenge is variety, not just volume. A network that only deepens in one direction has real limits.

As you plan your conversations, push yourself to reach across the categories where your network is thinnest. That might mean a different industry, a different career stage, a different geography, or a sector you've never spent much time thinking about.

The sub-challenges below are optional, but they're designed to push you toward the connections that are hardest to make and most likely to surprise you.

Over the course of your challenge, have a conversation with someone who...

Works in an industry or sector you've never worked in.	Is at least ten years behind or ahead of you in their career.	You found based on something they wrote or said publicly.
You haven't spoken to in more than five years.	Works at an organization significantly larger or smaller than yours.	Lives in a different time zone.
Works independently, as a freelancer, consultant, or founder.	Works at the intersection of your field and one you don't know well.	You were introduced to by someone else specifically for this challenge.
Has a job title you had to look up.	Works in a for-profit if you're primarily in nonprofit, or vice versa.	You choose: define your own stretch.

### A Final Word

There used to be a full-page ad in every airline's in-flight magazine (a magazine was a paper publication you read before smartphones, ask someone over forty) for a matchmaking service called It's Just Lunch. The whole premise was that lunch is low-stakes: easier than dinner, no big commitment, just two people getting to know each other. That's the energy here. It's just a conversation.

You're not pitching anything, not asking for anything, not trying to close anything. You're just making a connection with another human being. Go in curious. Go in looking to give. Be honest about what you don't know and genuinely interested in what the other person does. That's it.

## Sources Cited

1. Granovetter, M. S. (1973). "The strength of weak ties." *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), 1360–1380. <https://snap.stanford.edu/class/cs224w-readings/granovetter73weakties.pdf>
2. Rajkumar, K., Saint-Jacques, G., Bojinov, I., Brynjolfsson, E., and Aral, S. "A Causal Test of the Strength of Weak Ties." *Science*, 377(6612): 1304-1310, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abl4476>