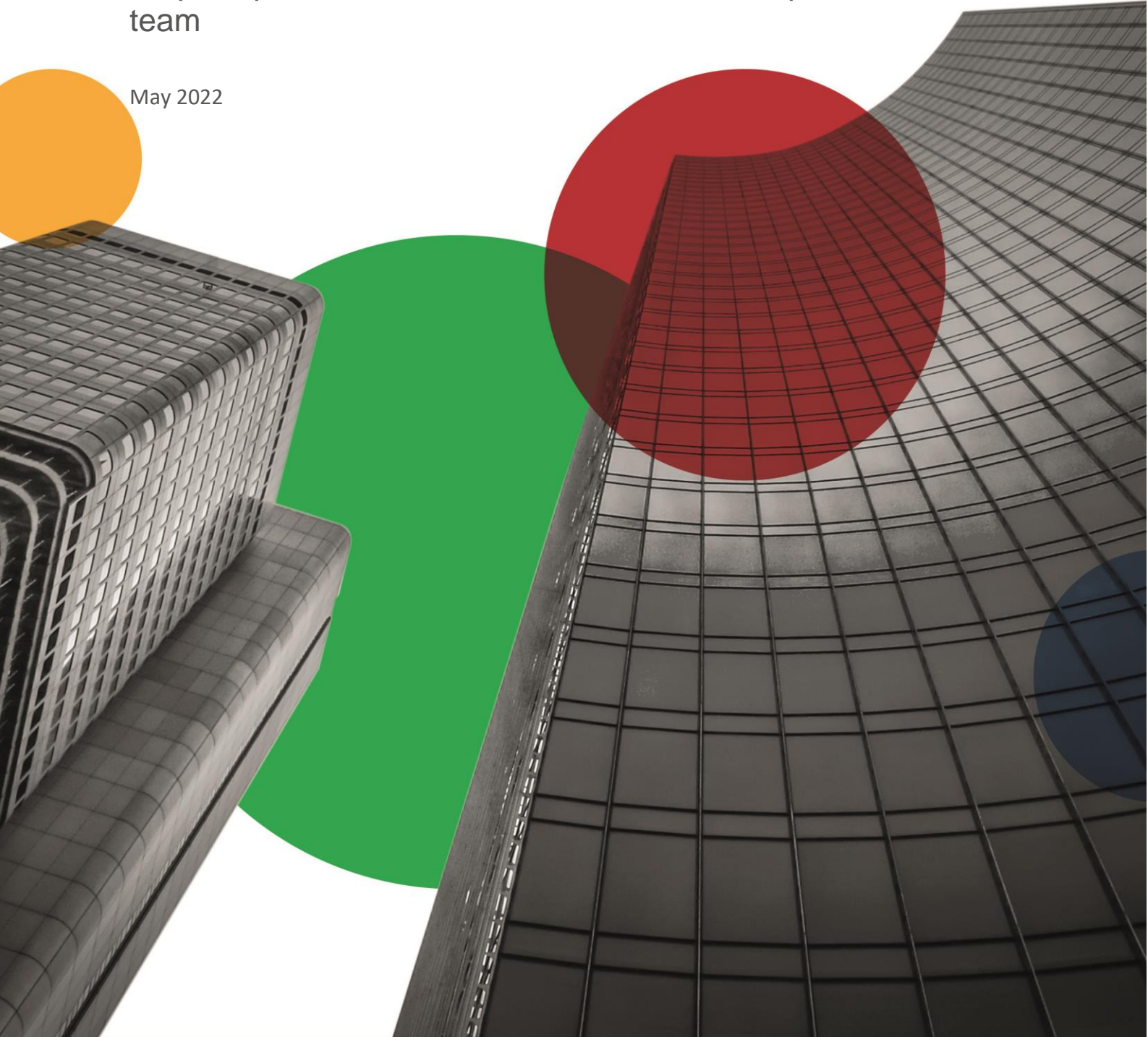


Developing your network in a hybrid world – How to make it work for you

Helpful tips from the ICAS Professional Development team

May 2022



As we transition into our next ‘new normal’ and adapt to practices in a hybrid working world, we look at ways to make it work for you.

The main aim of networking is to make connections to help you in your professional development but developing a network is not always easy. It takes time and effort to build connections and trust with others and to develop sustainable relationships. Just the idea of networking can make many of us feel uncomfortable and it hasn't been particularly easy over the last few years with periods of lockdown, travel restrictions and most events moving online.

We're slowly seeing a return to in-person events and many employers are now introducing hybrid working practices, however, whilst we have seen the ease and effectiveness of offering online opportunities – reduction in costs, increased capacity, the ability to attend an event on the other side of the world – there are certain aspects of networking that online simply can't replicate.

Here we provide some top tips to help you succeed at networking in a hybrid world.

Seek mentorship to develop your network

Seeking the support and guidance of a mentor can help you develop your network in several ways:

- Skills development – As well as aiding career progression, mentoring can also help mentees to expand their network through skills development. By developing key skills such as communication, presentation and responsiveness, mentors can guide their mentees to be better at networking. For this to be effective, the mentee must be prepared to be pro-active and work on their networking skills. Mentors can use the opportunity as a refresher on the best networking techniques now that face-to-face events are slowly returning. Mentors can offer advice on their best networking strategies and think about what may or may not currently work.
- Encouragement – Mentors can also help encourage mentees to search for networking opportunities both online and in-person. This may include local groups or associations that offer business networking events. If appropriate and possible, mentors and mentees may also be able to attend event together so the mentee can build their networking skills and contacts whilst being supported by their mentor. The mentor may also be able to introduce the mentee to key, relevant contacts in their own networks.

Events and webinars

Attending courses and conferences, both online and in-person, and webinars are a great way to find out more about a certain topic or update your technical knowledge. They're also a great way to widen your network. ICAS offers [events and webinars](#) covering a range of topics, from specialist updates to politics and wellbeing. We also offer a range of paid-for formalised [training courses](#) to help you build the right skills and knowledge. All these sessions include expert speakers in their field, are informative and count towards your annual CPD requirement. Specific course topics, such as [practical networking](#) and [how to create and develop your personal professional brand](#), will take you through some of the steps and activities to help you become a consummate networker and make a real difference to your personal and business reputations.

As well as these advantages, you have the opportunity to increase your network by connecting with speakers and other delegates using the online Q&A and chat functions provided by online events, and making the most of any break-out sessions or general breaks to get to know your fellow attendees. Strike up a conversation and then follow up with any new connections you make by connecting on social platforms such as LinkedIn. Engage with your new connection by sending a request or email along with a message to say you enjoyed the presentation or chatting with them.

Virtual networking events

Virtual networking events are a great way to have fun, meet new like-minded people and, of course, expand your professional network. The advantage of a virtual event is that people can attend from all over the world which means that you have a much wider range of people to tap into and grow your network way beyond your town, city or even your country.

We all know about the traditional social platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter, which are all great but try searching for other more informal networking channels. Meetup, which traditionally organised in-person, localised get-togethers for individuals with similar interests (e.g., specific business sectors or industries) now offers online engagement opportunities too, but now that restrictions have lifted, it's a great time to suggest meeting face-to-face with your online connections, to deepen and strengthen those networks.

Clubs and activities

In addition to widening your professional network, it's important to remember to look after your personal connections and wellbeing. Many of the platforms already discussed are a great way to meet people with similar interests or hobbies and joining or even starting a club, virtual or otherwise, is a great way to talk to colleagues or friends about a specific topic or take part in an activity. The pandemic alerted us to virtual events for almost everything – wine tasting, book clubs, yoga and fitness classes, knitting and so much more – and just a few minutes on Google should allow you to find something you are interested in regardless of where in the world you are located.

Engaging with others who share your passion for hobbies or interests can also help to build your confidence and help you take the next step to networking in a professional capacity.

Engaging at networking events

Regardless of whether you're attending an online or in-person networking event, preparation is mostly the same and equally important if you want to make the most of the opportunity:

- **Ensure you're there on time.** Check your webcam, Wi-Fi connection or train times and ensure you are present in plenty of time. Make sure that your phone is on silent, that you have a pen and paper (to take notes) or business cards to hand out to any new connections.
- **Prepare an introduction.** Whether you're in a break-out session or just having a coffee break, you'll likely be introducing yourself to someone or a group of people. When faced with a short period of time to make your introduction, make it memorable. Keep it simple but interesting with just a few sentences about yourself and what you do. You can go into more detail during other opportunities where you can chat longer.
- **Participate in discussions.** Be active during discussions and engage with your group or speaker. As well as having your voice heard, this will help you to get to know some of the other attendees. If you're online, you should keep your camera on as this will help you stand out if others have theirs off and it encourages you to engage.
- **Speak up.** Many of us shy away from being the first person to speak but doing so you can lead the conversation and ensure people know who you are.
- **Be an active listener.** It's important to pay attention when others are speaking. By actively listening you're not only showing interest in and respect for the person speaking, but can also allow you to be more engaged in the conversation. This will help to build a connection, which can be followed up later.
- **End your conversations appropriately.** Thank people for engaging with you and, if appropriate, let them know how you'll be following up i.e., via email or a LinkedIn request, etc. You won't always connect or follow up with everyone you meet at an event though so remember to always be polite. If the conversation isn't working for you, keep it short and move on to someone else if applicable. If you're in an online group situation, you can allow someone else to start a conversation or direct a question towards another party.

Build your personal brand

Your personal brand refers to how you present and promote yourself, your skills, your experience and your career goals to others and is what elevates your profile, making you stand out from everyone else.

Building a valuable personal brand online can take some time but when done right, can help you to foster meaningful connections or could even help you nail that new job you wanted.

Here are some tips to help develop your personal brand effectively on social media:

- **Update your profile(s).** Think about which accounts you are going to focus on (LinkedIn, Instagram) and make sure all your information is relevant and up to date, paying attention to any historical content which may have a negative effect on the image you wish to portray. Treat your profile like your CV; ensure it accurately demonstrates your skills and job history and remember to use a recent, appropriate photo – LinkedIn profiles with profile pictures get more views than those without.
- **Regularly share content.** It can be hard to find the balance between over and under-sharing on social media – over posting can lead to fatigue and a look of desperation but, on the other hand, posting once per week or month is likely to achieve very little. Posting around 3 to 4 times per week is the perfect number to attract and retain attention. Try to share an article or news piece you have found interesting, pose a question to your network and ask for others' opinions. If you are feeling adventurous, write your own article on your choice of subject or area of expertise, such as something related to your current role or interest. This allows you to share your knowledge with your network and gives them an opportunity to interact with you via comments and likes. Remember to keep your content engaging.
- **Connect with people.** Spend some time connecting with people who you work with, or those who work in your industry and with whom you would potentially like to work, or those who are in a position you aspire to hold. Send a note with your request to connect and include a short explanation of why you want to connect. This will help to start a conversation and establish a relationship. It's also a good idea to consider importing your contacts from Gmail or Outlook or from your phone into your social networks. Platform such as Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn allow for a free import of contacts – an easy way to instantly build your network. Once you have connections in place, maintain momentum by liking and commenting on content they post and interact with. These small steps can lead to you getting to know someone and developing a relationship.
- **Develop your support network.** You've now got a profile and a good network of people who you have engaged with via your posts. It's now time to consider finding and joining a group. LinkedIn offers several opportunities to join groups related to specific topics or industries where you can share your insights and build your personal brand. Groups can help you to challenge and motivate yourself, pushing you to achieve goals. They're also a great place to discover new opportunities, generate ideas, receive feedback, expand your skills, gain confidence, and of course, make new friends.

Networking is important regardless of where it happens. It can help create long-lasting relationships which often benefit both parties, it makes you noticeable, can help you develop your confidence, opens opportunities, provides a resource, and contributes to your social wellbeing, and for these reasons, should be at the heart of your career.

Disclaimer:

This help sheet is designed to assist members with an important issue of general application and is not intended to be a definitive statement covering all aspects of this area. No responsibility for any person acting or refraining to act as a result of any material in this help sheet can be accepted by ICAS.



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