

Unsuck Your Career

The no-bullsh*t guide to getting
your dream job and thriving
in tomorrow's marketplace.

DOMINIC SOH

7. PROCESS (PART 1)

Who do you know?

Someone said that your network determines your net worth. It's not really what you know that matters, but who you know.

Regardless of your field or industry, people would always be involved and knowing how to connect and develop meaningful relationships is key to thriving in today's marketplace.

Put yourself out there and see yourself in a good light

Remember the chapter where we talked about confidence and competence? This is where they come in.

To establish meaningful relationships, you would have to put yourself out there and meet people – don't wait for them to come to you – you go to them.

And when you are approaching others, how you see yourself will have a profound impact on how the conversation would go.

To give you my own example, I wasn't born a confident person. During my teenage years I would always have a book with me when commuting. This is not only because I love reading, but because I didn't want/dare to look at others in the eye. I just wanted to get to my destination with as little social contact as possible.

Due to my lack of confidence, I thought that I didn't have much to offer to others. Because of this belief, I saw less of a need to meet with others, and because I saw less incentive to meet with others, I stagnated in my worldview which further reinforced my belief of not having much to offer.

Can you see the self-perpetuating cycle?

So I decided one day that things needed to change.

I needed to see myself in a much better light.

I chose to see myself as having passion, energy, enthusiasm and a hungering curiosity to learn more from others. I chose to not see my lack of knowledge or experience as an excuse to not meet others, but as a reason to meet others so that I could learn more from them.

Once I changed my mind(set), my world changed.

I now look forward to networking events and am usually the proactive one to make contact with other professionals. I reached out, asked a lot of questions and kept the conversations going.

If I can do this, so can you!

Approaching employers before the job hunt

One key job/employability skill to have is being able to approach employers even before you look for jobs.

When you do this, you not only expand your professional network and develop interpersonal confidence, you are actually putting yourself and your personal brand out there. You are making an impression with employers and that will work in your favour down the road because if the employer sees your name in the pile of resumes, your face will come to mind – you are not just another name in the pile, you are a person who made an impression.

The way to approach employers before job hunting is through the use of informational interviews.

A job interview is to a job what an informational interview is to information.

Basically, you are interviewing employers for information.

Here's how I, as the aspiring management consultant, would reach out.

Step 1: Identify the professional. For my case, I could get in touch with the HR professional of a consulting firm or a management consultant. To get in touch with the consultant, I could do a quick search on Google, do a look up on LinkedIn or look through the company's website.

Step 2: Reach out to the professional. If I'm going to do so via phone, I would give the company a ring. You can usually find the number on their contact page.

Me: Hi, is this XYZ company?

Receptionist: Yes it is.

Me: I was wondering if I could speak to Sam, who works as a management consultant? I would like to find out more about what he does in his role as I'm interested to pursue this line of work.

Receptionist: Sure! Please hold on while I direct you to his line.

Sam: Hello!

Me: Hi Sam, how are you today?

Sam: I'm good, thanks!

Me: I came across your name on the company website and I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about your job. I'm really interested to work as a management consultant after my graduation.

Sam: Sounds great! Good for it!

You can then proceed to ask a few questions during your informational interview, which is covered in the next section.

The 5 questions you can ask in an informational interview

Here are the 5 questions which I've used over and over again during the informational interviews I had with other professionals.

If time permits, feel free to ask all of them. If not, then pick and choose a few which you would use.

1. What does your day to day look like?

This is the same as asking “What do you do in your job?”.

Through this, you could ask for more details on the job’s demands, challenges and highlights.

2. If you wanted to break into your industry, what would you do?

This is the same as asking “How do I enter your industry?”

This is a great question to ask if you need some ideas on entering your desired role and industry. Apart from conventional means, some professionals got to their roles through networking, referrals, graduate positions, internal transfers, etc.

3. What are a few common entry-level jobs?

This is the same as asking “What’s a good starting point for fresh candidates like me?”.

This question helps you identify some entry-level roles which you are eligible to go for, especially when many listed jobs out there are experienced positions.

4. What next steps would you recommend me to take?

This is the same as asking “I’m new to this, so what do you think I should do next?”.

Once you have shared your background and situation, you might get some tips on how to proceed from here.

5. Would you know of any openings/opportunities in your organisation?

This is the same as asking “Are you guys hiring?”.

I love this question because even before an organisation publishes a public job advertisement, any vacancies would be announced internally first. And if you are able to get “insider news” of any vacant positions, you already have an advantage over the crowd.

How to be a networking superstar

Remember in the earlier chapter where we talked about seizing opportunities to build up your profile and portfolio?

It’s good to be interesting – having strong interest in your career path, having accumulated substantial and relevant work experience – but it’s much better to be interested. This is because everyone loves talking about themselves.

In a nutshell, the best way to make the most out of a social or networking event is to get others to do the talking.

And to make that happen, you can ask the same questions used in informational interviews.

Additionally, here are 4 tips for you to excel in your next networking occasion.

1. Have in mind your conversational plan

What is your game plan? What is your strategy to get to know other professionals?

If you are unsure, do have a think about it. And if you think you might forget, do write it down on a piece of post-it and bring it along.

If I'm at a technology forum or meet-up, some of the questions I use include:

- What do you do?
- What brings you here?
- How did you find the talk/presentation so far?
- Is there any particular topic or issue you are looking forward to hear?
- What's your favourite bit?

2. Practice, observe, learn, repeat

Nothing (really) happens until you step out of your comfort zone.

Practice. You can start by approaching “easy” targets – individuals who are by themselves, or people who generally look less intimidating.

Observe. Once you are engaged in conversation, be aware of how things are moving along. What vibes are you getting?

How are the non-verbal cues and body language of the other person looking like? Do they sound interested? Are they responding with a similar level of enthusiasm as you? Or are they looking elsewhere when you are talking?

Learn. After each encounter, recall what went well and what didn't. Keep doing what went well and stop doing that which didn't turn out well.

Repeat. Repeat this cycle and continuously refine your approach and technique for each person.

3. Flatter others

This is not about inflating the egos of others – doing so is undesirable and would be very obvious to the other party.

Instead, learn how to praise others appropriately.

For instance, rather than just saying “Hi there! What brings you here?”, I might go for “Hi there! Good to see you today! What brings you here?”.

Notice the slight difference?

On top of this, if there's something worth praising, then go for it. A good example would be conversing with the speaker of the event. You could thank him for his insightful and riveting presentation, and bring out one specific point which you really resonated with.

4. Encourage others

There will be times when you would meet those who have less experience than you.

The key here is to be a source of inspiration and encouragement to them. Since you have covered more ground than they do, you can always provide a listening ear as they share some of the struggles and challenges they face.

Do not be tempted to disregard them as “unworthy” of conversation.

This is because the world is really small and you might never know when you would need their help down the road. And they might know someone who could prove helpful to you as well.

The FORD technique

This technique is another tool that helped me greatly in engaging in small talk and in sustaining the conversation with people I’ve never met before.

F: Family

O: Occupation

R: Recreation

D: Dreams

Depending on the context and situation, you might place a greater emphasis on one component over the other.

If you are in a parent bringing your child to a play organised by her school, you might focus on the Family part, when having a conversation with another parent.

If you are a professional at an industry networking event, I'm sure you could start the conversation talking about Occupations.

And if you are a student attending a motivational event/conference, you might chat about Dreams with a fellow attendee.

Follow up

To bring your networking skills to another level, learnt the art of following up.

I feel that too many people, myself included sometimes, can be so engrossed in conversations during the event, but don't do anything after the event.

It's the equivalent of going on a great date and not corresponding with the other person after the special occasion.

In a professional networking event, I would always ask for the other person's name card or business card, whether I have one or not. This gives me his company's name, direct number and direct email address, so that I can stay in touch with him down the road.

On top of that, I would look him up on LinkedIn and send him a request to add him to my network.

To take things further, you could send a note (via email, SMS or even phone call) to express your delight and appreciation in meeting the other person and that you would love to continue the conversation or stay in touch. You could even ask the person whether he/she is keen to catch up for a coffee so that you can carry on the conversation.

Doing so would help you leave a strong impression on the people you have met.

9. PRODUCT

What are you working on right now? What value can you bring to the table?

Previously we talked about how you can craft your personal brand statement and create a strong personal brand that helps you stand out from the crowd.

Here we would explore how you can seize the opportunities around you and even create opportunities for yourself, to make you more employable.

Start now

Honestly speaking, many students make the “mistake” of thinking and working on their careers only after they graduate.

I can’t really blame them for this because many spend long hours in classrooms, lecture theatres, projects, assignments and on extra-curricular activities. Not to mention setting aside time for friends and family, engaging in recreation and working part-time.

It’s important to start on your career even before you graduate.

Why? It’s because if you ask any working professional, he would say that you won’t really use much of what you studied in the working world. I can speak from personal

experience and you should try asking your fellow peers in the marketplace.

In other words, there is a gross and oversized gap between what is taught in the classroom compared to what is truly needed in the boardroom.

And it doesn't help that grades and academic results are not high up in the list of what employers are looking for.

I've coached thousands of university students and many agree that going into the workforce is a whole new ball game. What I also found is that the earlier a student prepares for her career, the smoother the transition from education to employment, and the less the shock as well.

"The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. The second best time is now." – Chinese Proverb

If you have not started or thought about working on your career, don't fret – now's the time. It's never too early or too late to work on it.

Seizing the best opportunities for yourself

The one thing that is common between regular people and extremely successful individuals is the amount of time they have.

Both have 24 hours in a day, but how they spend their time would ultimately determine their level of success.

Hence, I'll need you to challenge the way you think about grabbing opportunities that come your way and in how you manage your time. It's not enough to just strive to be efficient – you'll need to be effective and strategic as well. And being strategic is about knowing your end point and knowing what you need to look out for and take hold of, in order to get to your intended destination. In addition, it's also about knowing what to say “yes” to and what to decline.

Back to the management consultant example, I'll list the various avenues for opportunities and I'll state how I would go about seizing them.

Part-time work

I understand that you might have rent and bills to pay and any form of part time work that pays well would fit the bill (pardon the pun).

However, don't just think of the short-term needs – think of your long-term goals as well.

Would being a waiter in a restaurant help me with my management consulting career?

To a certain extent, yes. There might be some transferrable skills to be learnt in my part-time F&B job.

But could I spend my time more effectively? Definitely!

In this case, I would look up part-time consulting jobs or positions. If I can't find any, I would reach out to small-sized

consulting firms to see if I can work for them part-time in any capacity.

I would rather earn much less doing administrative work for a consulting company than be paid more being a restaurant worker. Doing so would expose me to the company's culture and I would have the chance to speak to the consultants in the company to find out more about what they do. In addition, if I can prove myself to be remarkable in my part-time role, there might be a chance of them transiting me to a full-time position later.

Internships, summer programs, graduate programs

Although spots are limited and competition is high, these programs are an excellent avenue for you to gain relevant work experience in your chosen field even before you graduate.

If you are not able to get into the large and reputable firms, do give smaller companies a shot. Apply or express your interest to them directly – there's totally no harm in trying.

Volunteer work

Volunteering is a great way for you to get out of your comfort zone, meet new people, pick up useful skills and contribute to something worthwhile. This definitely helps to broaden your perspective of life and even better, stretch your worldview if you choose to volunteer abroad.

As an aspiring management consultant, I might volunteer for my university's orientation week at the start of the semester, and then apply for a role in my institute's student consulting club.

Creating and running your own projects

I love this avenue because if you tried all other means but to no avail, you can always strive to create experience for yourself.

Running your own project really throws you outside your comfort zone because there are no set guidelines for you to follow, and it really shows that you have initiative to make things happen.

So what could I get my hands on as an aspiring management consultant?

The first thing that comes to mind is to create a company/business that does consulting for other small businesses for free.

Some people might say that I need consulting experience to consult. Well, there's truth to that, but if I am going to wait till I have experience to do something, then I might be waiting for a long time. Instead, I should do something and get the experience along the way.

If I don't feel comfortable approaching businesses yet, then I would approach the clubs and societies in my university.

What would I be consulting with them?

Simple. I'll sit down with their committee to identify some of the problems and challenges (like lack of membership engagement, poor turnout at events) they face as a club and devise ways to address those problems. I might then implement the strategies with them, while seeking to consult with other clubs in the interim.

Attending events and conferences

What events and conferences could I attend which are closely aligned with my chosen career?

Since I'm doing management consulting, I would look up industry bodies or associations which are relevant to me, like the Australian Institute of Management or the Institute of Management Consultants.

A quick way to find out the bodies or associations relevant to you is to do a Google search of <your industry><your country>. So for me, I'd do a search for "Management Consulting Australia".

Once you have identified your related industry bodies, look to see what events they are holding and attend them. This is a great way to have a better grasp of the happenings and developments within the industry and to meet like-minded individuals and professionals.

Reading books, articles and resources

What materials could I get my hands on which would increase my knowledge of my career and industry?

Since I'm an aspiring management consultant, I would devour articles from Inc, Forbes, Entrepreneur, Business Insider and Fast Company.

I would also get my hands on TED talks, videos, podcasts and blog posts from professionals in this arena.

Meeting up with experts and leaders in your field

Who could you meet to gain a better understanding of how your industry works?

Who are the experts and thought leaders in your field? What are they discussing at the moment, and how can you find out more? To take it to the next level, how can you be part of the discussion?

For the aspiring management consultant, I could attend business networking breakfasts or events where one of the speakers is someone in a prominent position from a reputable consulting firm. I could also look them up on LinkedIn and read the articles which they produce.

Breaking the chicken-and-egg problem

Learning to create opportunities for yourself is a very handy improvising skill. This is beneficial because there are a

number of entry-level jobs which require prior work experience.

Notice the irony?

It's a chicken-and-egg problem. One needs the job to gain experience, and one needs experience to get the job in the first place.

Thus, you would need to think beyond this cycle – in fact, “break” the cycle by creating experience for yourself.

If I can't find formal management consulting experience, then I could improvise by getting such experience from doing pro-bono consulting for small firms and not-for-profits.

Breaking down the job requirements

One other useful tip which benefited a lot of students is to take a look at a job advertisement for a role which you are applying for (down the road) and identify what the job requirements are.

Next, you take those requirements and “work backwards”. This would get you to build experience even before you start applying for the job.

For instance, if the job requires one to have 1-3 years of management consulting experience, I could either volunteer in my university's student consulting club for 2 years, do pro-bono consulting for a charity for 1 year and/or work part-time (in any capacity) in a consulting firm.

Another example, taken from an actual job advertisement: “As you grow into the role, business development will become a significant focus. You are great at building relationships, love speaking to people, identifying their needs and thinking about ways to solve their problems.”

For this, I would be thinking “How would I develop my skills in building relationships, speaking to people, identifying needs and solving problems?” Perhaps being part of the committee for the school’s career fair would suffice – I would be dealing with various stakeholders, speaking and workshopping with my committee members, identifying the needs of employers and exhibitors, and brainstorming with my team on how we could address the problems faced by employers.

Think action and evidence

I want you to develop what is called a bias-for-action. This means having a strong inclination to get out there and make things happen – to walk the talk and practice what you preach.

In fact, I want you to place more value on doing than mere saying. This is because execution is the best way to learn, as it’s too easy to fall into the trap of waiting for the “right” or “perfect” moment to attack.

Too many job candidates “claim” that they have excellent team, communication and leadership skills. Saying that is one thing, proving through evidence is another.

Also, so many people have lofty and marvellous dreams, but few are actually willing or have put in the blood, sweat and tears investment to achieve (or at least try to achieve) those dreams.

So if your dream job requires you to have experience in leading a team, solving strategic problems, dealing with stakeholders and working in a high-pressure environment, think of what opportunities you could seize and then make it happen.

Do your homework and a bit of research, but don't wait till you have all the information before execution, because that will never happen. Even members of the military, like special forces operatives who operate in a high-pressure, high-stakes and high-risk environment, understand what it means to make decisions with incomplete information. Once they have about 80% of the information, they would execute.

Purchase the book “Unsuck Your Career” on Amazon at:

https://www.amazon.com/Unsuck-Your-Career-no-bullsh-marketplace/dp/0648219615/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1523672956&sr=8-1&keywords=unsuck+your+career

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Dominic Soh is an international no-BS careers and resilience speaker. He has spoken to audiences in Australia, Asia and Africa, and has interviewed CEOs, Navy SEALs and Olympians. He is featured on 10 Australian media outlets and is aspiring to become a bestselling author just to prove the school bullies wrong.

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ISBN 978-1-2345678-9-7



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