

MODULE 4

Building Relationships and Evaluating Fit



At this stage, you're likely accomplishing so much more than you realize each day. Let's recap, shall we?

You're ensuring you understand your manager's expectations, setting goals, and making some progress toward them, and beginning to get important feedback that will propel you to do your best work. Pat yourself on the back for your hard work so far, but remember there is still plenty to do.

We've mentioned this, but just to reiterate, the returnship is not solely about getting the job at the end. It's about...

1. gaining experiences to put on your resume
2. refreshing your network
3. learning more about yourself.

**"Who you know is
what you know."**

— Tami Forman,
founder, Path Forward



Though the concept of networking can feel a bit nebulous or daunting, getting to know the team and company are easier than you think! In this guide, we'll walk you through the different ways you can build and leverage connections at any stage in the returnship. Through active networking, you'll learn more about the company – as well as yourself. (A great first step? Connecting with fellow returners via our [LinkedIn group!](#))

Gaining Experience and Building Relationships Go Hand in Hand

Building your network is a foolproof way to help you gain experience. How? For starters, take a look at your teammates; not only do they have helpful company knowledge, they likely also have great insight on criteria for the job you're hoping to secure full-time. Take advantage of their expertise and the context they can provide (company info, departmental relations, etc), while learning their reasons for sticking around.

Step #1: Build a rapport

Invite a teammate to a 15 min chat about their role. People love talking about themselves! If you're not in an office, check in via Gchat, Chime, Slack, etc. Plus, your unique position provides a great opener. They'll likely ask what a returnship is and boom – conversation initiated.

"Hi, I'm (name). I just started a returnship program as a (role). I'm really excited to be working on (list project) and learning more about the organization. I'd love to hear more about you and the work that you do. Would you be open to having a quick chat sometime this week?"

Step #2: Ask for their input

When working on a project, ask for a hand or a second opinion before showing your manager. An informal, targeted conversation allows you to show off what you've done so far and/or get feedback as to what your next steps should be.

"Hey, I'm working on this interesting project, but since I hear you're the resident expert in (Python, Excel, juggling, etc.), I thought I'd ask you for your thoughts."

Step #3: Follow up on your progress

Highlight how their insight contributed to a better outcome. They feel good. You feel good. You've gained another person invested in your success. Everyone wins!

"Thanks for your help! (Manager) was impressed with my (proposal/code/etc) and glad to hear you assisted. My next step is to (follow-up project). I'd love to hear your thoughts and keep you updated."



Look Beyond the Surface to Assess Culture Fit

As you start to get a firm understanding of the challenges that need to be solved on the team, start to look beyond the surface and ask questions about the bigger picture, such as, “I noticed our team has a lot of overlap with X department, could you explain the relationship and how responsibilities are divided?” or “How will this project affect other teams or the company as a whole?”

If you’re working for a smaller start-up where there is more natural and frequent collaboration across functions, this might be pretty easy. If you’re working at a large organization where opportunities for cross-pollination are a little harder to come by, ask for some help from your manager. Who do they recommend you speak to learn more about the organization on a broader scale?

In addition to connecting with the team to gain a deeper understanding of the work you’re doing, focus on exploring the greater organization to help you assess culture fit. Keep in mind: a company’s culture isn’t simply “good” or “bad.” Instead, your job here is to determine whether it’s good for you. As we always say, culture is like weather – it’s extremely local; keep in mind that it can vary across teams. Step back and assess the overall culture of the company and whether it’s a good fit for you.

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)

Joining an ERG or employee-organized community can help foster a sense of belonging and confidence, not to mention provide you leadership opportunities beyond your role. While you may or may not be able to officially join the group during the returnship period, spending some time now to learn more about the organization as a whole can be very helpful when considering whether you’d enjoy continuing the experience if offered employment at the program conclusion of the program.

Does your company have a lecture/speaker series? Do they have a parent or women’s ERG? When do these groups meet? Who is involved? Check your internal communication platforms to see if you can find a directory of members to reach out to and learn more. Or go one step further and drop in for a meeting or two and see what you think! Chances are, they’ll be very interested in meeting you and sharing more information.





Connecting on LinkedIn & IRL

When we talk to alumni of returnship programs, one of the most common regrets they have is that they didn't network enough. And we understand – it can be uncomfortable. Just remember that you have nothing to lose, and plenty to gain!

Have you spent some time updating your LinkedIn profile to show you're currently working at your company? If not, what are you waiting for? While you're at it, ensure you have an updated profile picture and start connecting with your colleagues online. If it's someone on your immediate team, you likely don't need to explain the invitation. If it's someone you ran into briefly or made small talk with as the first two on a Zoom call, include a quick note in your invitation saying that you're looking forward to chatting again soon.

If Fear is Holding You Back...

Take a look at these "worst case" scenarios and how to move past them.

Scenario #1: Someone says no to your LinkedIn/chat invite or doesn't respond.

Response: Follow up politely to see if they accidentally missed it, if there was a scheduling issue, etc. Still a "no" or no response? You have your answer – on to the next!

Scenario #2: You meet up and it's... awkward.

Response: Follow up with a thank you and give it a week or so to find ways you can better connect. Maybe bring a mutual teammate in or have a specific project to focus the conversation on. Preparing questions and simply asking for an informational interview can provide a clear goal and low stakes expectations. And if they don't seem to want to meet again? See Scenario #1.

So there you have it! No excuses, because the worst case scenarios really aren't that bad. Reach out – in person, online, via LinkedIn, anywhere and everywhere.





Gaining Visibility Without Seeming Self-Promotional

It's tough to strike the right balance when you are trying to impress the team and your manager while not seeming like you're trying to impress anyone. Below are a few tips to help make your talents evident, without feeling like you're self-promoting all the time.

- **Give credit where it's due**

If your colleague shared some insight that helped you take a project to the next level, give them a personal shout-out at the next team meeting or in an email blast.

- **Show interest in others**

Asking others about their role and interests will not only give you a fuller picture of the team functions and dynamic, it opens up opportunities to casually share your input. As rapport is established, it'll be easier for them to reach out to you and include you in discussions that you otherwise might not be privy to.

- **Look for ways to help out**

You have a wealth of experience in your field and the benefit of a fresh perspective. You may have ideas that the team hasn't thought of yet.

- **Ask for presenting opportunities**

Look for ways to share what you're working on in larger group settings, such as all-hands, team meetings and demonstrations. The benefit here is that multiple people will likely be presenting in these situations, making you less of the focal point, while still getting your name, talents, and insights out there.

Uncovering Future Career Pathways

Just in case anyone's keeping score: Your next job is not your last job. Yes, even if you are offered ongoing employment at the conclusion of the program, chances are good that in a year or two (or five or ten), you'll get the itch for a new challenge. Indulging in curiosity to see what career paths may be available down the road are more than encouraged.

Ask about career advancement at your company and how to pursue your track of choice. Think about whether you want to manage people, become a technical expert in a specific process, and other future goals. Is there a corporate ladder in place that matches your goals? Does the timeline of when you can reach those goals seem feasible? Keep stock of where you want to be in a year or two, and beyond. Your company may not have every single thing you want for your future self, and you may not know exactly what those things are yet (which is totally okay), but there should be possibilities on the horizon. Your role – and the next one – should at least be a launching pad into the following step.

A mentor is a great place to start. If you haven't been assigned one, your manager or teammates can be very helpful. Are there some other leaders that would be willing to spend even 30 minutes talking to you about their career at your company? Take a leap and find out! One final tip: As you gather this information, remember to keep your primary focus on your current responsibilities. Nailing the expectations set upon you is the key to all the rest!



Networking Checklist

- Have you connected (or at least attempted to connect) with each member of your team? Take advantage of the communication tools available like Slack, Gchat, Chime, Zoom, etc.
- Have you asked your manager for help making additional connections beyond the team? Can you meet their manager or their colleague managing a separate but adjacent part of the business?
- As your understanding of the business grows, are you finding other stakeholders to introduce yourself too? Do you have a mentor in place or other point people who can answer your organizational questions?
- Have you updated your LinkedIn profile? Are you following up your in-person connections by connecting on LinkedIn?
- Have you reached out to ERGs or other groups that can help you learn more about the organization?
- Have you taken advantage of any opportunities to present at an all-hands, team meeting, demonstration, etc.?

The Path Forward Community

Don't forget about fellow returners! Going through the program is exciting and stressful and no one else is going to understand that as much as someone else going through it alongside you – either at your company or elsewhere.

Reach out to your organization's current and previous returners. You not only get moral support, you can maximize your network by leveraging theirs! As an added bonus, alumni can tell you what life is like on the other side of the process.

You can even access the advice and perspectives of those who have returned or are in returnship programs at other companies via the Path Forward Community on LinkedIn. [Join us!](#)



Path Forward

Join Path Forward volunteers, alumni, and your fellow returners in our [online community](#) to find helpful advice, resources, networking, and more.