

DIPLOMATIC SERVICE FAMILIES ASSOCIATION MAGAZINE

# CAROUSEL

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new country





# Finding your feet

Judith Perle guides us around some of the pitfalls you might imagine when it comes to building a network in a new country

**Left:** Judith Perle, networking adviser and co-author of *The Network Effect*.

Whether we want to admit it or not, we all know that a healthy network is key to building a new life in a new country. So whether you want to deepen your understanding of local culture or just need to find the best way to book a train ticket, you need people who can help. But how do you find them? Here are a few of the most common misconceptions that I've encountered in my work writing about and teaching networking skills.

### **I don't know anybody local**

Yes you do, and so do your family, friends and colleagues. And don't discount help from neighbours, your partner's colleagues, the letting agent, local shopkeepers, people at the gym... One of the joys and continual surprises of networking is that you can never, ever predict who knows whom, so one of the keys to success is to be open to meeting a wide range of people, even if you can't fit them neatly into your game plan.

It goes without saying that if you (or your partner) have been posted abroad, a good place to start is among your colleagues. But they, too, are probably British – so breaking out of a relatively closed work-based circle and getting in touch with locals brings its own challenges. So it's best not to restrict yourself to the obvious contacts – and don't turn down offers of introductions to people outside your own profession or ordinary sphere of interest.

Another way of meeting like-minded people is, quite simply, to get out and about. Join professional associations, social clubs, cultural organisations. And if you are really serious about extending your network, get involved. Most organisations are crying out for volunteers to manage events and sit on committees. Cold calling as a private citizen is difficult; contacting someone on behalf of, say, the local branch of the University of London alumni association is much easier.

### **I don't have any good friends here.**

Many people think that their network should be packed full of close and trusted friends. Friends are important, of course, but building trust takes time, so be patient.

Don't discount people you don't know very well – these acquaintances (or 'weak ties') can be (and usually are) surprisingly significant. Why? Simply because of our natural tendency to cluster – our strong ties, the people we call friends or close colleagues tend to be rather like ourselves. We come from the same country, have similar backgrounds, speak the same language, work in the same profession. That means that we live in a similar world and know similar people.

So if you want to extend your reach beyond, say, your expat community or the few companies that you are directly connected to, you need to seize any opportunity to connect

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with people outside your normal circle. A healthy and vibrant network embraces different backgrounds, ages, professions, nationalities and religions. Some contacts are the close ties on whom we rely for support; others will be the weak ties who help us bridge gaps, and make inroads into new worlds.

### **How can I ask for help?**

#### **What do I have to offer in return?**

An English idiom may help here: If you don't ask, you don't get. Don't expect people to know automatically what you need or how they can help.

Cultural norms vary, of course, so you'll need to do your best to adapt. In the US or Australia, a straightforward request may work best. Elsewhere, you might need to be more circumspect. For example, it's important not to put someone in an uncomfortable position by directly asking for a job. Instead, tell them that as





part of your job search you need advice and/or information and you hope they might be able to help. Could they spare time for a chat, perhaps over coffee? People like to help, and most of us are susceptible to gentle flattery!

Remember, too, that so often what you need is really easy for others to give. Advice is free, after all. And an appropriate introduction isn't a big deal for most people. As a general rule, it's not a good idea to put people on the spot: ask for

**“The problem with (networking) culture is that it is largely invisible and almost entirely subconscious.”**

something small, and give them a way out. Don't underestimate what you can give in return. Maybe you could provide an outsider's insights into their culture or practical advice and help if they intend to travel to the UK. Once you are settled, you may be able to return the favour by introducing them to someone helpful in your network. And last but not least, you may simply be the most interesting and least demanding person they talk to that day.

**I'm nervous of being misunderstood or of misunderstanding.**

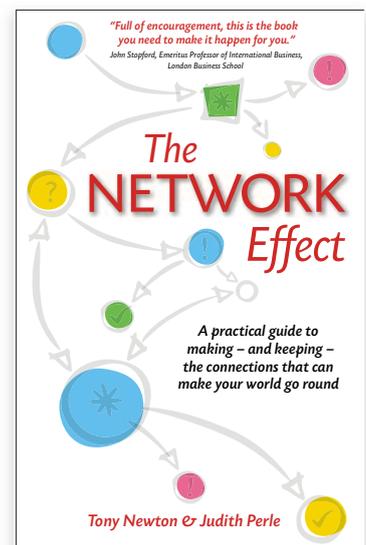
It's important to manage your expectations:

you will almost certainly make mistakes and get things wrong. Never ever assume that you don't need to learn the rules of the game. And the fact that you have been to, say, India many times on holiday, or read lots of books about the country, or have good Indian friends may help, but won't protect you completely.

So what to do? Being prepared is half the battle – if you accept that misunderstandings are pretty inevitable, it'll be easier to get over them and not let them stop you in your tracks. In addition, get help and advice from both your fellow compatriots and from locals.

Ask a friendly native to read a tricky letter you are writing, for example, to confirm that they can make sense of it. Some locals may be used to working with foreigners and be able to both make allowances and help steer you through the assault course of do's and don'ts. Others will be less self-aware: the problem with culture (and that includes networking culture) is that it is largely invisible and almost entirely subconscious. We often don't realise that we do what we do and we can't explain what goes against the grain until we are faced with it. Fellow Brits who have been there longer than you may be able to explain what's acceptable and what isn't more easily than a local could.

I'd like to leave you with another time-honoured saying: practice makes perfect. Accept that you'll make mistakes, but also be willing to learn from them. That way, you'll be well on the way to building a supportive network.



### The Network Effect

If you'd like to learn more about how to network, read Judith Perle and Tony Newton's book *The Network Effect*. Written as an extension of their interactive workshops, the book walks you through everything you need to know about connecting with other people. It's available from Amazon, or direct from the publishers via [www.TheNetworkEffect.co.uk](http://www.TheNetworkEffect.co.uk) (ISBN: 978-0-9567098-0-6).

**Quote discount code tne10 to get a 10% reduction off the cover price.**

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See Networking in Nigeria on page 24 about a group of professional HMG spouses and partners who have set up a dynamic group in Nigeria.