



**W**ell, networks first came to my attention when I was taking part in the Moving Up programme, which supports Black and Asian minoritized groups, I wasn't really 'put in touch' with a network, it just sort of happened. But finding a mentor through that experience has been fantastic, it's been instrumental in helping me go for better jobs and to get to where I am now. I've always known that networking is helpful, and I wanted to be part of the network - but it's also strange, I'm not the most confident person, so it's taken some time.

**S**o, a network is a group of people who can help you in your professional life. I thought networking meant meeting people who could open doors for you professionally, but that was all. Now I realise it's much more about learning, but also getting a chance to be a mentor yourself.

It's definitely about learning. I've got no degree, I've learned my job the hard way, but networking is a way to find out more about how you can be doing things better or differently. You could have 20 years behind you in the job, but you still don't know everything. Anyone who says they're an expert at what they do in this job, is just setting themselves up to fail!

**C**asualty, a network is a group of people who can help you in your professional life. Oh yes, but it's a strange one that comes to mind. There was a big discussion about oral health at one of the events. Because we were talking about it among ourselves, just casually, I think it sank home a bit more than usual - we can support people in terms of helping them to manage their health. Did you know, it's better not to use water to rinse your mouth? I never knew that. But after that network meeting, it was something I could get going and put straight into place. I like finding things out that way, it's useful.

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Well, it's quite strange, but sometimes going along to a networking event opens you up to things you might want to do, but can't. Not straight away. And I think you need to be prepared for that. As an example, there's the EMR - the Electronic Medication Record system - which is going to change things for a lot of organisations. It's something I really want to get ahead of but, for various reasons, we're not quite ready for it.

I'd do it tomorrow, and what I discovered through the networks, is that a lot of people have set one of these up already. They're saying it's just fantastic. So naturally, I want to do it too - it's part of my personality, I guess. Sometimes there's almost too much information out there, so you need to take what you can from it.

The other thing I'd say is that I'm not a natural sharer. I sometimes don't have confidence in myself. And I'm not always great at sharing the things I've learned, I tend to think about putting them straight into practice first! But no, networking is just great.

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Oh yes, definitely! Particularly if you're someone who's good at developing yourself, or you're into shareability. It's a brilliant thing to do.

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I'm tempted to say, 'feel the fear and do it anyway', but the truth is, I'd say go along and stay in the background to start with. A bit of listening is really helpful, until you find something you can get involved with at least.

Me, I like reading information. I love it, but I'm quite good at being self-motivated anyway, so going along to network events wasn't natural for me. Still, I think going to networks should almost be presented as part of your job description in a care role. In a six-month probation period, for example, I'd like to see people being expected to go along to a network meeting - just to see what it's about. You might come back and think, "that's not for me," but it's unlikely.

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That's something I've been thinking about for a while. I'm not a natural organiser, so I do need to make sure the network opportunities are in my diary when they come in via email. In fact, my first network session put me in contact with a mentor, and we've just exchanged details about events since then. But the challenge for me is going to be getting even more involved, really taking advantage of it and finding ways to share even more of what I learn. The great thing is, it doesn't matter if it's not your ideas that get shared. Everyone's passing information on all of the time, that's how knowledge-sharing works.

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