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How to make job contacts want to help you (essay)

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Reaching out to people you don't know to get information can feel difficult. Part of what makes it feel that way is that it can trigger a whole range of uncomfortable, negative emotional states in some of us: mild fear of the unknown, frustration, social anxiety, an awkward sense of embarrassment and so on.

It can feel frustrating when you spend time crafting 30 emails to people but don't get a single response. You may feel anxious about writing to a high-level executive at an organization you'd like to learn more about -- even if they are an alum of your university or someone you've already met. You may even feel a tinge of embarrassment when talking about your own experiences and accomplishments as a grad student or postdoc to someone who has much more of both after working in the career field for decades.

Networking is also hard work -- it takes time and energy to do it properly. If you just reach out to some random person on LinkedIn who works at a company where you'd like to work and ask them to give you something (information, an interview, an internship, a job), their likelihood of responding is low.

Networking is not the process of reaching out to people. Networking is the process of thinking about whom to reach out to, why, with what goal, and how to do so in a manner that minimizes the negative emotional states that both you and the other person experience and that maximizes the benefit you gain.

In terms of minimizing negative emotional states, here is one of my simple networking rules: focus on making your interaction with new networking contacts a positive experience *for them*. Make them feel good about the interactions they have with you, and they will associate you with those positive experiences. Also, for many of us, initiating contact with strangers will always be not so enjoyable. At some fundamental, deep-rooted, psychological level, that may never change. So by focusing on making new contacts feel positive, you can shift your attention from what you are feeling to what they are feeling.

Let's explore a networking scenario where we can look at these emotional experiences.

Scenario 1

As a Ph.D. student exploring careers, you find an alum from your institution on LinkedIn who is working as a manager at a company that interests you (or at least, a company you have heard other people with your background say they're interested in). Having been told that networking is important, you reach out with an email that looks something like this.

Dear Julia,

I am a Ph.D. student at the University of Pennsylvania studying the transmigrational movements of artisans across Europe in the 17th century -- focusing on how the written word and visual representations of concepts such as harmony and rebellion gained prominence in poetic form. I found your profile on LinkedIn and see that you work at Hennessy Inc. I am very interested in learning more about your firm and was wondering whether you could give me some insight into your career field, and some advice on my résumé if I were interested in a role in this industry. Would you be able to meet for coffee?

Many thanks,

Joseph

If you have written an email like this to someone, then chances are you may not have received an immediate response. Why? Because this request is associated with various triggers that can make the reader feel uncomfortable. Here are some possible issues.

Thesis research. It is common for Ph.D. students to talk about their thesis research as they describe themselves. It is definitely on your mind, after all. In this case, however, the research mentioned is probably not that relevant to the reader. Starting the conversation off by confusing the reader is going to prime them for other less-than-positive emotional states. For someone buried under a mountain of projects, it could even lead to a sense of irritation: "Why am I reading this?"

What are you interested in? In the email above, the writer is interested in getting information about the firm and career field. As written, this leaves the reader feeling potentially undervalued. If they feel you are only contacting them because they have information about something you need, it doesn't provide them with an immediate desire to give you anything. Keeping the focus on them as an individual, and the important advice they can offer, can change this feeling. Everyone likes to be valued for their own distinct insights -- not as a walking overview of career fields.

What do you want from them? In this case, the request is for information about the firm and broader career field, as well as for advice on a résumé. That's a lot. If you think about it, that could be a multipage report. No one wants to write such a report for a stranger during a busy workday. Also, where would the reader even start with this request? A complete history of their firm? A rundown of all of the different companies that work in that field, with a corresponding glossary of key terms and position descriptions? That is too much. It's a request that can make the reader feel overwhelmed.

Perhaps they would be happy to help, but the request feels so large that the reader simultaneously feels irked at being asked to provide it and guilty for not being the type of person who does. Those negative feelings get projected onto you and become associated with you in their brain -- definitely something to avoid.

Meeting for coffee. The way people respond to this request will definitely depend on their personality type. Here are the questions that would go through my head in response to this request.

- Do I have time for this?
- When might I be free?
- Will they be free when I am free?
- How will we figure out when we are both free?
- How long will the process of figuring this out take?
- Will I need to chat with them on the phone to figure this out? (Because I don't want to do that.)
- Where would we go for coffee?
- Will there be a place to sit, or will it be really busy?
- What happens if there is no place to sit?
- If we go, how would I know who they are and what they look like?

- How long will it take me to look for pictures of them online to help me recognize them?
- Will I look like an idiot if I don't recognize them?
- Should I offer to pay?
- What happens if it is terribly awkward and I want to leave? Do I have an excuse to leave?
- What excuse could I manufacture?
- Do I need to prepare anything?
- What happens if they ask me about open jobs at my organization? (We don't have any right now.)
- Didn't my supervisor want me to finish up those slides for her? (Oh, crap, yes, and by the end of today.)

And off I go onto my next required work task, putting this stress-inducing internal narrative to rest and focusing on something that feels much more immediate and controllable. Now, just because I think those things doesn't mean that I will act on them. But just thinking about these complexities can be emotionally draining. And all the while that I am, I will probably be asking myself, "Is this person someone I want to actually help?"

Thus, starting off with a request to meet for coffee may not always be the best approach to take. So let's try a different one where instead you:

1. Do research about the firm and the industry ahead of time. This will help you to ask more specific questions that are easier to answer and will demonstrate that you have an interest.
2. Create a narrative that is focused on the industry of the person to whom you are reaching out. If their role/job/company has nothing to do with transmigrational movements, then don't mention them.
3. Value the individual you are talking to, not just the information or contacts they have.
4. Don't make people prepare. Ask for information they already have: their own perspectives and insights.
5. Identify the people you both know (and focus on people you have second-degree connections with first as part of your networking strategy). If you can mention a contact in common, it gives the person you are approaching an opportunity to do a small favor for someone they already know, which makes them feel good.
6. Take the stepping-stone approach. You don't need to get answers to all your questions in the first interaction. Indeed, your first goal is to get a simple response from a new contact. You can build on that as you begin to develop a professional relationship. People will do more for you when they know you better.
7. Don't make the person feel awkward or anxious.

Based on this approach, an email might look a little different.

Dear Julia,

I was exploring program analyst roles online and found your profile on LinkedIn. We both know James from the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Pennsylvania, and he encouraged me to reach out to you when I let him know I found your information. It is great to see how you have used your Ph.D. experiences in this field. I have been exploring the different roles of program analysts in nonprofits and think tanks, and while I am learning a lot about this field from my online research, I would love to be able to understand more about the role from people with real-life experiences. Your career path seems really interesting, and it would be fabulous to hear more about some of the experiences you have had. Given your company's recent merger, I am sure that there is a lot going on for you right now, but would it be OK if I reached out by email with a couple of quick questions about your current position?

Many thanks,

Joseph

All you need from the reader here is a one-word response. It is easy for them to reply with a very quick “Yes, sure!” before they get distracted with their actual work. And, from their perspective, nothing in this email should trigger any negative-focused, emotion-laden internal dialogue.

Once someone has agreed to a request like this, the likelihood of them responding to future interactions increases considerably. While every networking opportunity is distinctive, focusing on making your new contacts feel positive is never a bad approach to take -- and will minimize your own fears and frustrations.

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