



The Dangers of Getting Jobs Through Friends and Family

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Men are more ready to repay an injury than a benefit, because gratitude is a burden and revenge a pleasure.

--Tacitus (c. 55-120 A.D.)

"Oh, I already have a friend there. I'll just contact her." In the [legal recruiting](#) realm, this is one of the more common things we hear after informing an attorney that a certain law firm has a job opening. There is a lot you need to consider before you decide to apply to a job through a friend or relative or take a job working for a friend or relative. First, it is exceedingly rare that a friend or family member will ever be able to get you a position. The reason for this is simple: despite what you think, the involvement of friends or family members in your [job search](#) may actually hurt you because they may not want to help you get a job. Moreover, all employers know the severe problems that can arise when friends or relatives work together. Due to this, simply going through a close contact is often something that is counterproductive to your job search. Second, even if you are one of the few people who are able to get a position through a friend or family member, you could run into a great deal of trouble and harm your relationship with that person in the process.

When you are seeking a job through a friend, you may be surprised to find that he or she will not help you get a job with his or her organization. Moreover, the organization may actually look upon you negatively and not hire you if you try to use a friend or family member to get a job.

One of the most common things that people think is that friends are their best allies in a job search. After all, the job market is a harsh place. Who better to help you with your job search than a friend employed inside a firm for which you would like to work? A friend certainly recognizes all of your strengths and appreciates you for the person you are. In addition, the thought of depending upon a stranger when you have a friend or family member close by does not make a lot of sense. Certainly you can always trust a friend over a stranger, right?

I have been a [legal recruiter](#) for several years. I have represented more candidates than I can count. In all of my time as a legal recruiter, I have never once had a candidate get a job through a friend. Incredibly, I have actually gotten several candidates jobs with firms where they thought that they had friends inside who were helping them with their job searches-- "insiders" who never managed to get their friends interviews. Moreover, when I think back on my own life, I do not think that I have ever gotten any job by having a friend or relative help me.

The issue with using friends to help you with your job search is that you never know your friends as well as you think. Almost instinctively, many friends are competitive with one another. When you are dealing with people close to you, you will often agree with them just to avoid an argument. In fact, if you spend more than a couple of hours with your family or a group of friends, you will find this sort of thing occurring probably every few minutes throughout each conversation. Friends and family also often do their best to laugh extra hard at each other's jokes and cover up their unpleasant qualities. Your friends and family will most often say they love your taste in music, your choice of clothing, your house or apartment, your writing, and most everything you take seriously. It is possible your friends and family mean this. It is also possible they do not.

The thought of asking a friend to help you with a job search is, in effect, an attempt to shield yourself from the harshness of the world. The same enthusiasm your friends and family have for you in the personal realm, you may imagine, will directly translate to an eagerness to help you find work with their organization. I would offer at the outset that this is a possibility, and you may not be wrong in thinking this. Notwithstanding, this is often not the case.

One of the more common things that happens when people ask a friend or family member for help is *nothing*. The friend or family member gets your resume and thinks about it and then (for whatever reason) decides he or she does not want to forward it to the powers that be. You cannot imagine how common this is. If you have forwarded a resume to a friend inside a company recently, call the company about it. In more than 50 percent of cases, your "friend" will not have even forwarded the information. Friends will pleasantly tell you that they will, but they don't. Your friend will often lie and tell you he or she forwarded the information when the opposite is true. Again, I have seen this more times than I can count. The number is more than 50 percent (with the possible exception of firms that pay "bounties" for employees who bring candidates to their company).

Your guess as to why this occurs is as good as mine. Perhaps your friend or family member simply does not want the two of you working in the same office. Perhaps your friend does not want to take responsibility for what you might do if you were hired. Perhaps (just perhaps) your friend honestly does not think as highly of your capabilities as you do. While your friend may not tell you that he or she resents you because you once had, did, or said such and such, you can believe this can come out if you come seeking assistance with getting a job. Again, you will not even know this has come out; it just will. The firm may never see your resume.

Assuming your friend or family member does forward your resume, be prepared for all sorts of brutally honest assessments of your character and talents of which you personally may never have been aware. Most friends speak about one another with other groups of friends when the other is not around. Not all of this conversation is pleasant. Do you have any idea what your friends are saying about you? I can almost guarantee you that some of it is negative. You probably do not know even 10 percent of the negative things your friends and family say about you when you are not around. I have a question for you: do you want any of this negative information to be communicated to your potential employer?

There are reasons organizations do not like to hire friends and family members of their employees. *Nepotism* has traditionally been considered a negative term. The word originates from the Latin word *nephos*, which means "nephew," and was created to describe Pope Calixtus III's hiring of nephews as cardinals. The first anti-nepotism policies probably originated in the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages or Renaissance, when resentment began to build against

incompetent people appointed to high clerical offices. To this day, nepotism is something that can serve to create resentment in all employment environments. In this instance, I define "nepotism" as the hiring of friends as well as relatives.

Reducing corruption and increasing efficiency are the primary reasons many organizations have anti-nepotism policies. Corruption has always been a concern in this realm. If individuals who are friends or relatives work together, organizations fear that these individuals may collaborate to advance their own interests rather than the interests of the organization. Nepotism can also lower the morale of those who supervise relatives or friends of high-level members of the organization, those who work with them, and those who feel that rewards or promotions have been bestowed in an unfair manner. One or two friends or relatives may react negatively (and contrary to the interests of the organization) when another is criticized or disciplined. Finally, perception is a serious problem. Other employees will often perceive unequal treatment of a friend or relative regardless of whether or not this is the case.

While a great deal could be written about nepotism, suffice it to say that it is something many employers are concerned about. Using a perceived "in" with a firm to try to get a job may actually hurt you because of the firm's own feelings about nepotism.

It is important to note that not all organizations will be against nepotism. For example, in smaller, family-owned firms, nepotism is often common because it provides an efficient way to identify dedicated people. Nepotism may also foster a dedicated, family-like environment that boosts the morale of everyone--relatives and friends alike. A good example is the Central Intelligence Agency, which actually encourages the hiring of married couples. Having both spouses free to discuss classified information actually can reduce the strain of a high-stress career.

While nepotism may have its place, it is important to note that more often than not it can scare away employers. It is, therefore, better off avoided in the job search.

I review a lot of the resumes that we receive from throughout the United States each day at our recruiting firm, [BCG Attorney Search](#). There are two things that I frequently see: (1) associates (i.e., younger attorneys) who obviously do not have the qualifications to work inside a certain law firm, and (2) associates working for small law firms that are owned by their father or mother (with their own last name in the masthead) who are secretly looking for jobs. Each and every time I speak with these associates, I find that they are in positions because of family members and are extremely resentful of those family members for whatever reason. They have lots of negative things to say about them and desperately want a new job with the same salary and level of responsibility. Not once in my career have I seen someone from this class of associates who was qualified for a job even remotely as good as the one he or she was in at the time. Nevertheless, these associates always resent and, in most instances, hate the family member who got them the job they were unqualified for to begin with. Moreover, these associates refuse to go to a less-prestigious firm or job. Most often, in fact, they believe they should be working for an even better organization.

If you accept a job through a friend or family member, watch out. More importantly, watch yourself. In the end, you will likely be your own downfall. It is your friend or family member's act of kindness that will ultimately unbalance your relationship.

The typical pattern that happens when someone is hired by a friend or family member is as follows. First, the people hired are grateful for being hired, but generally want to feel as if they deserve their good fortune. Accordingly, the friends or family members hired will look for all sorts of justifications to show the world and demonstrate to themselves that they deserve their good fortune.

One response from the people hired may be to believe that their being hired is a "payback" of sorts for everything that they have ever done to be kind to their friend or family member. They begin a process of justifying their hiring by thinking of everything they have ever said or done for the friend or family member.

Another response may be for the people hired to begin comparing themselves to others in the firm and believing that they are more intelligent than all of those other people. Therefore, the hired friends or family members justify their positions by often unjustly attacking their fellow employees.

The most common reaction, though, is that the hired friend or family member will become resentful of the person who helped him or her get the job to begin with. The receipt of a favor can come to mean, in the hired friend or family member's eyes, that he or she was hired due to this and not based on merit. There is what I would term "hidden condescension" in the act of hiring a friend or family member that grinds at the new employee all the time.

Whoever you are working for likely cares more about (1) getting the job done and (2) doing the job as well as it can be done than about having friendly feelings flowing between the two of you. Your status as a friend or relative of someone does not mean that you are automatically the one who can best do the job. If you cannot do the job in the best manner, more resentment is going to arise when your friend or family member asks another person to help with a given task.

One of the more brilliant statesmen of the 19th century, Napoleon's foreign minister Talleyrand, decided that his boss was leading France to ruin. Talleyrand therefore decided that he needed to take Napoleon down. Obviously, the task of overthrowing Napoleon would not be a small one. In order to carry it out, Talleyrand desperately needed to enlist the assistance of someone he could trust. Instead of turning to a friend for help, Talleyrand turned to his worst enemy, Fouché, the head of the secret police.

Fouché had previously tried to have Talleyrand assassinated. The brilliance of Talleyrand's choice was that it provided Fouché with the opportunity to reconcile with Talleyrand on an emotional level. In addition, there was nothing Fouché would expect from Talleyrand, and, quite the contrary, Fouché would work hard to prove that he was worthy of Talleyrand's picking him for the task. When people have something to prove, they will work harder than those who do not. Compare this to what could have occurred if Talleyrand simply went to a friend for help.

Talleyrand chose Fouché because he knew that their relationship would be based entirely on their mutual self-interest in removing Napoleon and not be poisoned by personal feelings. While their effort to topple Napoleon ultimately failed, they were able to generate much interest in the cause and have a good relationship going forward.

Like Talleyrand, it is important to realize that getting a job and working in a job on equal ground and in an atmosphere of mutual self-interest is crucial. Personal feelings obscure the fact that there is work that needs to be done in an efficient manner. In a work environment where everyone is evaluated and judged on merit, more productivity and honesty on all sides can only ensure good business.

One of the more disturbing phone calls I have received over the years was from the dean of career services at a second-tier law school. The dean had read an article I wrote, which advised attorneys on how to get a job in a tough legal market. The

dean told me that the first place everyone should always look to get a job was with his or her family. The dean then told me that people should go to events and "make friends" with other attorneys and then ask them for a job (a.k.a. "networking").

As I listened to the dean speak, it became abundantly clear to me that she did not like any manner of getting a job that did not come through friends or family. In her view, getting a job through a friend or family member was far better than getting a job through a "stranger." It is natural when looking for a job to contact the people you know to see if they can help you with your job search. In fact, I would guess that most attorneys early in their careers contact a family member, a personal friend, or an acquaintance when seeking a new job. Most people I have worked with as a recruiter (who have contacted me for assistance) have been clear with me that before contacting a recruiter they contacted a friend, an acquaintance, or another person they were connected with in some social manner to see if that person could help with a job search. Moreover, most attorneys who have been practicing for a year or more have at some point in time told a friend that they would try to assist him or her with getting a [job at their law firm](#).

While it may sound hard to believe--and contrary to the advice of the dean--you actually may be safer getting a job without the help of family or friends and working in an environment without family or friends. You do both at your own risk. Most of the time, I believe the risks far outweigh the potential long-term and short-term rewards.

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