

The Foot-in-the-Door Phenomenon and Your Job Search

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One of the most powerful and important things you can do to [get a job](#) or achieve anything in life is learn how to just get your foot in the door. Once you are able to get your foot in the door, everything changes.

My entire life, I have seen firsthand the power of people getting their foot in the door. A large part of the battle for success in your career revolves around your ability to do this, because once you get your foot in the door incredible things can happen to you. Once you are *in*, the people you are working with will protect you if you work hard. You will also be in a position to impart massive change on the world.

Several years ago, I was in a relationship with a woman who worked for David Geffen, who is one of the most powerful and richest men in Hollywood. This woman used to work at Geffen's house, and when she was there she would see people like President Bill Clinton walking around. Amazingly, Geffen never completed college. He started his career working in the mail room at the William Morris Agency. To [get the job](#), he was asked to prove that he had graduated from college, so he forged a letter to that effect. Geffen was such a hard worker that, once he was able to get his foot in the door, he was able to achieve what his true pedigree would not have allowed him to achieve. While people may not approve of Geffen forging the fact that he went to college, doing so got him in the door. The rest is history; getting his foot in the door gave Geffen the opportunity to become a powerful agent, and ultimately, hang out with presidents, make movies, become a generous benefactor, and more.

All of his successes came from his ability to get in the door.

Several years ago, I was speaking to an attorney who was working at what is widely considered the most difficult [law firm](#) to get hired by in the United States. The attorneys who work in this law firm all seem to have graduated as the top one or two students from the best law schools in the United States. Simply stated, it is all but impossible to get a job at this law firm. When I looked at this woman's transcript, however, I realized that she had done very well in law school, but nowhere near well enough to get a job at this particular law firm. Then I realized something else-- she had started working at the law firm at the age of 18, as a secretary, and had worked there for almost seven years before finally going to a third-tier law school. Nevertheless, the law firm had happily hired her once she had graduated from [law school](#), because she already had her foot in the door.

During the Korean War, Chinese communists used the foot-in-the-door phenomenon with American prisoners. Unlike the North Koreans, who were very savage with the American prisoners, the Chinese were very nice to the prisoners. The Americans who were captured had been trained to provide nothing but their name, rank, and serial number. The Chinese, however, managed to be extremely successful in getting the prisoners to be informants, to denounce the United States, and more.

During the war, a prisoner might be taken to a room, given a cigarette and something to eat. Then they would sit there with the Chinese for some time. They could potentially sit there for hours chatting about this or that, but really nothing in particular. The prisoner would feel like he was being treated very well and would let his defenses down to some degree. Then the prisoner might be asked to make a very simple statement that, on the surface, did not sound all that bad:

"In communism there is no unemployment and in the United States there is. Therefore, America is not perfect."

However, where this gets interesting is in regards to what the Chinese would do later. According to one account of this, in *Readings in Managerial Psychology* by Harold J. Leavitt, Lewis R. Pondy, and David M. Boje:

But once these minor requests were complied with, the men found themselves pushed to submit to related but more substantive requests. A man who just agreed with his Chinese interrogator that the United States is not perfect, might then be asked to indicate some of the ways in which he thought this was the case. Once he had so explained himself, he might be asked to make a list of these "problems with America" and to sign his name to it. Later he might be asked to read his list in a discussion group with other prisoners. "After all, it's what you really believe isn't it?" Still later he might be asked to write an essay expanding on his list and discussing these problems in greater detail.

The Chinese might then use his name and his essay in an anti-American radio broadcast beamed not only to the entire camp, but to other POW camps in North Korea as well as to American forces in South Korea. Suddenly he would find himself a "collaborator," having given aid and comfort to the enemy. Aware that he had written an essay without any strong threats or coercion, many times a man would change his image of himself to be consistent with the deed, and with the new "collaborator" label, often resulting in even more extensive acts of collaboration.

A huge secret of getting the results you want from people, organizations, and others is to start small and get them to make larger and larger commitments. For example, when a man asks a woman out, he never says, "Hey, let's go have sex and then spend the next 60 years of our lives together in a committed relationship." Instead, he invites her to have coffee, go see a movie, take a walk, and so forth. Everything begins with very small steps, and these small steps lead to greater and greater commitment.

When a religious organization comes to your door, the people do not say: "Hey, we would like to invite you to renounce every other religion on the planet, come to our church every Sunday for the rest of your life, and give us as much of your money as you can until you die." Instead, they offer you a pamphlet and then ask if they can come back to see you at another time after you have had a chance to review the pamphlet. They seek smaller commitments from you at first. They know that the most important thing they can do is get their foot in the door. Once they do that, everything else falls into place much more easily.

The Scientologists do not ask people on the street if they are interested in getting therapy for the rest of their lives, in order to get aliens out of their body. No, they know it would be "crazy" to do this. Instead, they ask people to take a personality test, and then they build on this. You need to start small with anything, before you can build on it. Organizations are all smart

enough to know that the first step and challenge they face is getting their foot in the door.

One of the funniest things I have seen that business schools, college career counseling offices, and other organizations often do with their students is encourage them to ask for "informational interviews" with various alumni of the school, who work in important positions, and in the cities they are seeking to work in. For example, the counselors will coach their students to go out and contact various alumni and tell them they are planning on working in a given industry, in a certain city (the industry could be large and very broad such as banking, retail, law, health care, etc.). The students tell the alumni that they are interested in getting some information about what it is like to work in a given industry in that city and to "learn from someone in the trenches" or something along those lines. Since this is such a small request and seems quite harmless--"I'd love to provide this alumnus of my school some information"--the alumni of the school almost always agree. They figure that since there is some sort of affiliation between them and the student (having attended the same school), and the student is simply seeking some harmless information, there is nothing wrong with speaking to the student at all.

The student will invariably show up at the person's place of business well dressed, with a folder containing a résumé, and with a list of a few prepackaged questions to which the student already knows the answers. The student will then sit down with the employer and commence speaking with him or her. The entire time the employer is speaking, he or she is, on some level, evaluating whether or not the student would make a good hire. The student is not really there to get information 99% of the time, but to "get a foot in the door" and hopefully get a job, or future interview at the least. While the employer has easily agreed to the small request of an informational interview, he or she suddenly starts feeling a small tug to potentially hire the student. The "informational interview" is an incredibly effective tactic, and a brilliant example of the foot-in-the-door phenomenon.

We see the foot-in-the-door phenomenon in shopping centers, grocery stores, and all sorts of places every day. The "free sample" in the grocery store is an example of the foot-in-the-door tactic. You are offered a piece of something to eat or drink, and you try it. You then end up buying something you normally would not have bought. Someone sprays some perfume on you while you are strolling through a department store, and you decide to purchase it. It happens all the time.

What does the foot-in-the-door mean for your career? It means that you do not always need to ask for the moon when looking for a job. You can start out small and build from there. David Geffen started out working [part time](#) at the William Morris Agency. You can start out working in your dream job part time. You can start out as a contract employee. If you want an important job inside the company you can start out doing something that is relatively unimportant. *Who cares what it is?* Starting out doing something unimportant is a good way to get your foot in the door.

This is what internships are in many companies. Numerous companies and other organizations have unpaid internships for students. People come from all over the country to work for one organization or another for free each summer or during the school year. You might ask, why would someone want to work for an organization for free? This is a great question. Working some place for free does not seem to make a lot of sense, until you realize that the person is really just doing everything within their power to get their foot in the door.

If you really, really want to work for a particular employer, the most important thing you can do is get your foot in the door. In a bad job market you can really make the foot-in-the-door phenomenon work for you. For example, many people are looking at the prospect of being unemployed for potentially weeks (or longer) in a bad recession. If you are going into a job interview where there is a lot of competition with an employer you really want to work for, a good strategy might be to say something along these lines during the later stages of your interview:

"Listen, I have really wanted to work at this company for a long time. Financially, I am okay and do not have any pressing need for money at the moment. I am more concerned about having something to do during the day. I like working. I like the atmosphere here, and I really like this company. I would like to come work here for free for a month so you can see what I am like. Regardless of what happens, I will make the best effort I can during this time; you will have someone doing the job right away, and it will not cost you anything."

This strategy is incredibly effective and it can work wonders. *Why?* Because you are showing a commitment to the employer. You are showing that you like to work. You are not making the employer feel guilty about not paying you. You are not obligating the person in any way, and you are giving the employer something for nothing. This strategy works and it is like a guided nuclear missile you can use against your competition for the jobs you are most interested in. Try it if you really want the job. If you pull it off right, it will get you a foot in the door, and once you get your foot in the door, this can lead to a full-time job later.

You need to get your foot in the door and knowing how to do this will pay huge rewards. The most successful salespeople, job seekers, and others all know that the biggest step they make in their march toward a job or sale is getting the employer, or prospect, to open that door.

THE LESSON

Getting your foot in the door is an important, necessary first step towards getting the job you want. Once you are "in", your colleagues will protect you if you work hard and you will have the same opportunity to compete with others. The biggest step you can make in your progress towards your goals is to get your prospective employer to let your foot in the door, even if only a little.