

## Getting Referrals from Powerful People (We All Know Someone)

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was practicing law at a major Los Angeles law firm several years ago, something happened that was difficult for me to believe. The firm where I worked employed some of the top law school graduates in the United States. For example, in the year before I joined, they had hired three of the top five ranked graduates out of Harvard Law School. Most of the attorneys were students from the top of their class at either Harvard, Stanford, or Yale, and the ones who were not, were often first in their class from the top ten or twenty law schools. This firm had fewer than fifty attorneys when I joined, and had the reputation at that time for being called upon to handle very sophisticated litigation cases.

One day, the firm [hired an attorney](#) who graduated in the middle of his class from one of the worst law schools in the United States. He was brought in for a round of interviews and lunch with younger attorneys, none of whom had any idea what was going on. Here former editors of the *Harvard Law Review* and so forth, who were conducting the interview, were probably scratching their heads wondering precisely what was going on with this guy and why they were interviewing him: the guy was one or two years out of law school at the time and had bounced around between three or four jobs with small, unknown law firms during that time. It made no sense.

To the astonishment of the associates that had interviewed him, this guy was hired and was set up in his own office. An important partner in the law firm was moved down the hall and stationed in an office next to him. All day long, every day, the partner could be heard talking to the new associate in his office about this matter or that. After some time, word got out that the *new associate* the firm had hired was having a difficult time understanding fact patterns and basic legal concepts. The partner had been stationed next to the associate's office so he could "get him up to speed" and turn him into an excellent attorney.

Something did not add up about this situation. If someone was not intelligent enough, or did not have natural legal skills, any high-profile law firm would usually reject this attorney like a virus--and fast.

- Law firms do not move partners down a floor so they can sit in the office next to an associate and coach the person, explaining elementary methods of the law. They typically just fire the associate who does not make the grade.
- [Law firms](#) that have lots of really gifted attorneys do not hire people from fourth-tier law schools who finished in the middle of their class and cannot find a job. Gifted attorneys attract other gifted attorneys, and once the law firm has a decent number of them, they can hire graduates of the best law schools all day. They do not need to hire people from fourth-tier law schools.

After some time, word started getting around that the partner was completely frustrated having to work with the associate. The associate did not have good legal abilities and was having a very difficult time understanding basic concepts of the law. In addition, others who were working with this attorney were catching all sorts of *catastrophic errors* he was making, and a buzz developed within the firm that something was wrong with the guy.

The attorney who worked in the office close to me was my friend and was also good friends with the partner who had been responsible for coaching this new associate attorney each day.

"How did this guy get hired? Did the head of the law firm hire him as a favor?" he would ask the partner.

The partner somehow always avoided answering the question.

Late one evening, after several months, the partner confessed to my friend that the associate had been hired as a *referral* from one of the firm's most important clients. I never learned who the client was, or anything else for that matter, but I learned right then and there the power of a good referral.

Someone who is referred to a company or organization by an influential person has a major advantage in his or her job search and career. When someone is referred for a job by someone who has strong, influential ties to an organization, major and important things can happen.

Probably the easiest way of all to [get a job](#) is through referrals from important people. A referral from an important person is no ordinary referral: When you are referred to a job from an important person, many things are different:

- When you are recommended by an important person for a job, the company that interviews you is likely to trust you more in the interview.
- When you are recommended by an important person for a job, the company that interviews you is likely to negotiate with you less about your salary, benefits, and so forth.
- When you are recommended by an important person for a job, the company that interviews you is likely to be more up front with you about their expectations of you on the job.
- When you are recommended by an important person for a job, you are more likely to be promoted once you are hired.

There are numerous benefits to being referred to a company or job by an important person that the company or organization trusts. In fact, you often become instantly qualified for jobs you might not otherwise have had any chance of obtaining. Having an *in* with someone the company trusts is an incredible benefit.

Several years ago, my ex-wife was working for a woman who was arguably the most famous landscape designer in the United States. My ex-wife was very talented and the woman she worked for was based in New York City. The designer wanted my ex-wife to work for her in New York, and she knew that the biggest impediment to our moving to New York was my having a job in Los Angeles.

This woman was a *high society type*, and she was extremely well connected with the most important attorneys in New York. In fact, she knew the founding partners at several of the largest and most prestigious law firms in New York City--the sort of law firms that were incredibly hard to join, even if you were at the top of your class at a Harvard Law School, for example.

On a weekly basis she told my wife that she had spoken to the founding partner of this law firm or that law firm, and that the partner had agreed to hire me to work out of their New York City offices. This seemed unbelievable to me at the time, but it was true. All I needed to do to get a job at one of the most prestigious law firms in the United States was pack my bag and (presumably at the firm's expense) move across the country to take a job that I had never even interviewed for.

Things work this way everywhere. I have hired people in our company based on a request for a favor from a powerful individual. People get hired this way all the time. It is more common than you might think.

When I was growing up, I did not have any powerful connections and, for the most part, my family did not have any important connections either. I saw all sorts of kids getting jobs and doing this or that based on who their parents knew, or some sort of other connection. It always made me a tad jealous and it made me resent people who got jobs this way because I did not have the same connections. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I realize that a lot of my career has been based on trying to help people like myself who did not have prior connections.

- I have started and now run job search sites that show people all the available job opportunities, so they can seek and obtain jobs without having prior connections;
- I have started targeted mailing services, which introduce people to prospective employers, so they can seek and obtain jobs without having prior connections;
- I have started recruiting firms that do an incredible job of marketing candidates to various employers, so the candidates can seek and obtain jobs without having prior connections.

However, despite my successful efforts with all of these companies, I cannot ignore the fact that a recommendation for a job from someone in a position of power is a real *game changer* in many instances. Getting a recommendation from a powerful person for a job can make a gigantic difference and can even get you the job. Websites, mass mailings, and talented recruiters are very powerful tools; however, there is nothing more powerful than a recommendation from a person of influence.

Most people know someone important or have a connection to someone important. Your connection with important people is something that you need to nurture and take seriously. It could be an uncle, a friend of a parent, a parent of a friend, a friend of a friend. Whoever the person is, you need to make the absolute most of your connections with powerful and influential people. There are powerful and influential people everywhere, all around you, and your connection with them can change your life and your employment situation in an instant. Sometimes one phone call or one e-mail from the right person is all it takes to completely change your situation.

One of the most interesting things about interviewing people is asking for recommendations. When you ask someone if there is someone you can talk to about his performance in his previous job, you learn a tremendous amount. Many people sort of squirm and begin to look uncomfortable when they are asked for a recommendation. This is quite telling. When someone does not believe that she is going to get a good recommendation from her previous employer, or the employer before that, this is always a warning sign. When people believe that they are going to get good recommendations from previous employers, they typically are very quick to offer the names of numerous people that they know.

Regardless of what you do, the community of people in your profession is probably quite small. You need to be someone who "comes highly recommended" and there are few things more important in a [job search](#) than being recommended by someone for a job. Even more impressive is being referred for a job by an important reference.

Never burn any bridges. Make sure that people are always in a position where they are willing to refer you to someone important in the future.

**Industry Leaders.** Who are the leaders in your business or profession? Do they know you? Why not? You need to work on getting their attention. Contact them. You can refer to them in articles. You can let them know that you admire them and send them short notes. You can let them know that you respect their opinion. In addition, if you tell them that you are following them and are doing many things a certain way because of them, they cannot help but like and respect you, as long as you are genuine. How effective would it be if an industry leader referred you for a given job?

**People Who Are Also Involved in a Professional Association, Church, and So Forth.** Sharing a religious affiliation or some other association can also be extremely important in terms of getting references. Churches and homeowners' association meetings are often very good places to strike up relationships, because the people you meet there know your personality and can vouch for you.

**Relatives, Friends, and Neighbors.** These people all know people, and some of them are likely to know important people. In addition, some of these people may be very important people themselves. Many of these people will want to see you do well and will be more than happy to recommend you to someone in order to help you get a job.

**Competitors.** If you conduct yourself in a good way in your business and impress your competitors, they can also be a very good source of referrals as well. I have seen numerous people get jobs by being recommended by a competitor.

Regardless of how you locate and develop these relationships, it is always important that you put yourself in a position to get recommendations from powerful individuals. A recommendation from a powerful person can make a major difference in your job search. If you are unemployed and you know someone in power, or know someone who knows someone in power, reach out to him or her. It could change your life.

## THE LESSON

A recommendation from a powerful person can make a huge difference in your job search; a reference from an influential person makes a tremendous difference to a prospective employer, and thus can be a major advantage for you. When an important person whom the company trusts recommends you, you instantly qualify for positions that may previously have been unattainable. Make the absolute most of your connections with the powerful people in your life, because doing so can instantaneously change your career and life.

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