



Feature

## The Dangers of Getting Jobs Through (and Working With) 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.)



In the legal recruiting realm, one of the things we commonly hear when we inform an attorney seeking a position that a certain law firm has a job is “Oh, I already have a friend there. I’ll just contact them.” There is a lot you need to consider before you decide to apply for a job through a friend or relative or take a job working for a friend or relative.

First of all, it is exceedingly rare that a friend or family member will ever be able to get you a position. Despite what you may think, the involvement of a friend or family member in your job search may actually hurt you because your friend or family member may end up not helping you get a job. Moreover, all employers know about the severe problems that can arise when friends or family members work together. Due to this, simply going through a friend or family member is often counterproductive in your job search. Second, even if you are one of the few people who are able to get positions through friends or family members, you are likely to run into a great deal of trouble and harm your relationship with your friend or family member in the process.

This article examines the risks associated with attempting to get a job through a friend or family member as well as potential problems you will likely have if you ultimately get a position through a friend or family member. This article also describes some of the reasons to avoid working for a friend or family member. Finally, because it is so common to get jobs through friends or family members, this article examines the conditions in which it is acceptable and not likely to be a problem.

### The Risks of Trying to Get a Position Through a Friend or Family Member

When you are seeking a job through a friend or family member, you will often be surprised to find that the friend

or family member will not help you get a job with his or her organization. In fact, the organization may actually view you negatively and decide not to hire you if you try to use a friend or family member to get a job.

### 1. Friends and Family Members More Often Than Not Will Not Help You When You Are Seeking Jobs Through Them.

Associates commonly think that friends are their best allies in job searches. After all, the legal employment market is a harsh place. Who better to help you with your job search than a friend employed inside a law firm you would like to work at? A friend certainly recognizes all of your strengths and appreciates you for whom you are. In addition, the idea 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 more than a stranger.

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 seen a candidate get a job through a friend. Incredibly, I have actually gotten several candidates jobs with firms where they thought they had “insider” friends who were helping them with their job searches whose friends never managed to get them interviews. Moreover, when I think back on my own life, I do not think I have ever gotten any job because I had a friend or relative helping 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 you do. This is especially so in the legal realm. Most attorneys are almost instinctively competitive with one another. When you are dealing with friends or relatives, you will often agree with them just to avoid argument. In fact, if you spend more than a couple of hours with your family or a group of your friends, you may notice that this sort of thing is occurring every few minutes throughout each conversation.



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Friends and family members also often do their best to laugh extra hard at each other's jokes and overlook one another's unpleasant qualities. Your friends and family will often say they love your taste in music, your choice of clothing, your house or apartment, your writing, and most everything else you take seriously. It is possible your friends and family mean the things they say. It is also possible they do not.

The decision to ask a friend or family member to help you with a job search by speaking with his or her employer is, in effect, an attempt to shield yourself from the harshness of the world. You may imagine that the same enthusiasm your friends and family show for you in the personal realm will translate into glowing recommendations to their employers. I would offer at the outset that this is a possibility and that you may not be wrong in thinking this. Notwithstanding, you are most likely wrong.

Oftentimes when attorneys ask friends or family members for help, nothing happens. 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 law firm recently, call the hiring partner or recruiting coordinator and ask about it. In more than 50% of cases, your "friend" will not even forward the information. He or she will pleasantly promise to forward the information, but nothing is what will happen. Friends will often lie and tell you they forwarded your information when they did not. Again, I have seen this happen more times than I can count. (The only places where you might find exceptions to this rule are firms that pay "bounties" for attorneys who find other attorneys inside their law firms.)

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 are hired. Perhaps (just perhaps) your friend honestly does not think you are as good of a person as you think you are. While your friends might not tell you that they resent you because you have so and so, did so and so, or said such and such once, you can believe these sorts of thoughts will come to mind if you seek their assistance with getting jobs. Again, you will not even know this has happened. It will just happen, and the firm may never see your resume.

Assuming your friend or family member does forward your resume, you will still need to be prepared for all sorts of brutally honest assessments of your character and talents.

Most friends talk 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 even know 10% 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 part of this 90% of invisible negative information you are not aware of to be communicated to your potential employer?

## 2. The Reasons Organizations Do Not Like to Hire Friends or Family Members of Their Employees

Nepotism has traditionally had negative connotations. The word originates from the Latin word nephos, which means "nephew," and was created to describe Pope Calixtus III's practice of hiring nephews as cardinals. The first anti-nepotism policies probably originated in the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages or during the Renaissance, when resentment began to build against incompetents appointed to high clerical offices. To this day, nepotism can stir up resentment in any employment environment. For the purposes of this article, I will refer to "nepotism" when discussing the hiring of relatives as well as friends.

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 of two friends or relatives may react negatively (and contrary to the interests of the organization) when another is criticized or disciplined by the organization. Finally, perception is also a serious problem. Other employees will perceive unequal treatment of friends or relatives regardless of whether it is happening.

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



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It is important to note that not all firms are against nepotism. For example, in smaller family-owned law firms, it is commonly practiced because it provides an efficient way to identify dedicated attorneys. Nepotism may also foster a dedicated, family-like environment that boosts the morale of everyone. A good example is the Central Intelligence Agency, which encourages the hiring of married couples. When both spouses are free to discuss classified information with one another, it 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, attempting to engage in it will scare away employers. It is, therefore, better off avoided in the job search.

### **The Problems You Will Likely Have if You Get a Position Through a Friend or Family Member**

I review a lot of the resumes we receive each day at BCG Attorney Search from all over the United States. There are two things that I see a lot of: 1) associates who obviously do not have the qualifications to work inside certain law firms looking for jobs in such firms and 2) associates working for small law firms (with their own last names on the mastheads) who are secretly looking for jobs elsewhere.

Each and every time I speak with an associate who is in a position because of a family member, he or she is extremely resentful of the family member for some reason. He or she has lots of negative things to say about the family member and desperately wants a new job with the same salary and level of responsibility. Not once in my career can I remember one of these associates being 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 members who got them the jobs they were unqualified for to begin with. Moreover, these associates refuse to go to less prestigious firms or jobs. Most often, in fact, they believe they should be working for even better organizations.

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. Your friend's or family member's act of kindness will ultimately unbalance your relationship.

The typical pattern that occurs when someone is hired by a friend or family member is as follows. First, the person who has been hired is grateful. He appreciates the fact that he has been hired. However, the fact of the matter is that we all want

to feel as though we deserve our good fortune. Accordingly, the person who has been hired by a friend or family member will look for all sorts of justifications to show the world and demonstrate to himself that he deserves his good fortune.

One response of the person who has been hired may be to convince herself that being hired is a payback of sorts for every kind thing she has ever done for the friend or family member who hired her. She begins a process of justifying her hiring based on everything she has ever said or done for the friend or family member.

Another response may be for the person hired to begin comparing himself to others inside the same law firm and believing he is more intelligent than all of them. In this kind of situation, the hired friend or family member will justify his position by unjustly attacking his fellow employees.

The most common reaction, though, is that the hired friend or family member will become resentful of the person who helped her get the job to begin with. The receipt of a favor can come to mean, in the hired friend's or family member's eyes, that she was hired due to nepotism and not because she was deserving. There is what I would term "hidden condescension" in the act of hiring a friend or family member, and it grinds at those hired by friends or relatives all the time.

Whomever 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 he or she does about having friendly feelings flowing between the two of you. Even though you are a friend or family member, you may not be the one who can best do the job at all points in time. 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 him or her 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 out this task, 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 was Talleyrand's worst enemy and had even 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,



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Fouché expected nothing from Talleyrand and worked hard to prove that he was worthy of Talleyrand's decision to pick him for the task. People who have something to prove 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 would not be poisoned by personal feelings. While their efforts to topple Napoleon ultimately failed, they were able to generate much interest in the cause and maintain a good relationship going forward.

It is important to realize, like Talleyrand did, that getting and working in a job in which the employees are on equal ground and which promotes 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 based on his or her own merits, more productivity and honesty on all sides will ensue.

## Conclusions

One of the more disturbing phone calls I have received came from the dean of career services at a second-tier law school. The dean had read an article I wrote that advised attorneys on how to get a job in a tough legal market. The dean told me that the first place anyone should look when searching for a job was with his or her family and that if the candidate's family knew people, he or she should contact them.

The dean then told me that people should go to events, "make friends" with others, and later ask them for jobs. (Another name for this is "networking.") As I listened to the dean speak, it became abundantly clear to me that she did not like any manner of getting an attorney a job that did not involve friends or family. In her view, if a job came through a friend or family member, it was far better than a job that came through a "stranger."

When looking for a job, it is natural to want 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 who are just starting out in their careers contact relatives, family or personal friends, or acquaintances when seeking jobs. Most associates and partners 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 friends, acquaintances, or other people they were connected with in some way to see if they could help with their job searches. Furthermore, most attorneys who have been practicing for a year or more have at some point in time told friends that they would try to assist them with getting jobs at their law firms.

While it may be hard to believe—and it may run contrary to the advice of the law school dean I spoke with—you actually may be safer 1) getting a job without the help of family or friends and 2) 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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