



The danger of getting jobs through friends

By A. Harrison Barnes, Esq.

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 him." In the legal-recruiting realm, it's one of the more common things we hear after informing an attorney that a certain law firm has a job. 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. 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 actually counterproductive for your job search. Second, even if you are one of the few people who are able to get positions 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.

First, this article examines the risks associated with attempting to get a job through a friend or family member. Second, the article will then examine potential problems you could face if you ultimately get a position through these means.

Third, this article describes some of the reasons for not working for a friend or relative. Finally, because it is so common to get jobs through acquaintances, this article examines the conditions where it is acceptable and likely to not be a problem.

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

When you are seeking a job through a friend, you will often be surprised to find that he/she will not help you get a job with his/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.

1. Friends and Family Members More Often Than Not Do Not Help You When You Are Seeking a Job with Them

One of the most common things that associates do is 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 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.

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 where I had a friend or relative helping me.

The issue with using friends to try to help you with your job search is that you never know your friends as well as you think, especially in the legal realm. Almost instinctively, most attorneys are competitive with one another. When you are dealing with people close to you, 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 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 with his employer 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



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you find work with their organizations. 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 occur when attorneys ask a friend or family member for help is nothing. The friend or family member gets your resume, thinks about it, and then (for whatever reason) decides he/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 about it. In more than 50% of the cases, your "friend" will not have even forwarded the information. He/She will pleasantly tell you that he/she will, but he/she didn't. Your friend will often lie and tell you he/she forwarded the information when he/she did not. Again, I have seen this more times than I can count. The number is more than 50% (with the possible exception of firms that pay "bounties" to 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 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 might not tell you that he/she resents you because you have so and so, did so and so, or said such and such once, you can believe this can come out if you come to him/her 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 that you personally may never have been aware of. 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 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 of this 90% of invisible negative information you are not aware of to be communicated to your potential employer?

2. The Reasons Organizations Often Do Not Like to Hire Friends or 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 in the Middle Ages or Renaissance, when resentment began to build against incompetents appointed to high clerical offices. To this day, nepotism is something that can serve to create resentment in all employment environments. In this article, I define nepotism as 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 morale of those who supervise relatives of 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 by the organization. Finally, perception is a serious problem. Other employees will also perceive unequal treatment of one 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 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 because of the firm's own feelings about nepotism.

It is important to note that not all firms will be against nepotism. For example, in smaller, family-owned law firms, it is often common 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—relatives and friends alike and not 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 is something that can scare away employers. It should therefore be avoided in the job search.

B. The Problems You Will Likely Cause Yourself if You Get a Position Through a Friend or Family Member

I review a lot of the resumes that we receive throughout the



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United States each day at BCG Attorney Search. 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 and (2) associates working for small law firms (with their own last names in the mastheads) 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 the family members for whatever reason. They have lots of negative things to say about them and desperately want new jobs with the same salaries and levels of responsibility. Not once in my career do I think I have seen one of this class of associates who was qualified for a job even remotely as good as the one he/she was in at the time. Nevertheless, these associates always resent and, in most instances, hate the family member who got them the jobs they were unqualified for to begin with. Moreover, these associates refuse to go a less-prestigious firm or job. 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 important, 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 friendship.

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 fortunes. 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 fortunes.

One response of 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 friends or family members. They begin a process of justifying their hiring by everything they have ever said or done for the friend or family member.

Another response may be for the persons hired to begin comparing themselves to others inside the same law firm and believe they are more intelligent than all of these 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/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 he/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 him/her 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 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 down Napoleon. 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 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, 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 poisoned by personal feelings. While their effort to topple Napoleon ultimately failed, they were able to generate much interest in the cause and had a good relationship going forward.

Similarly, 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.



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C. Conclusions

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 that 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 their family. The Dean then told me that people should go to events and “make friends” with other attorneys and then ask them for jobs (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 an attorney job that did not come through friends or family. In her view, if a job came through a friend or family member, it 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 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 a friend, an acquaintance, or another person they were connected with in some social manner to see if he/she 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 them with getting a job at their law firms.

While it may be difficult to believe—and contrary to the advice of the Dean—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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