

Help! Save My Career!

by Donald Asher, America's Job Search Guru

(this article originally appeared in *USAirways Magazine*)

Dear Guru Don:

I feel stuck in my career and want to make a change. I do medical billing, and I think I'm pretty good at it. I'm patient, no pun intended. I have a real knack for details, and keeping up with things, so my open items are always the minimum in our office. Basically, I'd like to think I'm a model employee. My boss says the same thing, but she also says there's no way to move up here. She has been in her position for over ten years, and that's okay for her, but I'm a young person with some ambitions. I'd like to buy a house some day, start a family, and marry my boyfriend. I don't need to be the president of the company, but I'd like to get a couple of steps up while I'm young and willing to work stupid hours and whatever else it takes. I'm a bit of a generalist, and am open to all types of jobs.

My problem is that I am shy. I'm not shy with people at work, or people I have to call on the job, but I'm really shy with people I don't know, or where I don't have a clearly defined relationship. I guess I'd rather die than call a stranger and ask them for a job. So I've been applying for jobs online for six months without a single interview. I get polite little emails from computers, and that's about it. I feel like if I don't overcome this problem, I'm going to become my boss, sitting right here in ten years, wondering what happened.

Can you help me? Please don't tell me to just get over it or to join Toastmasters or something. I'm not going to become someone I'm not, so please try to give me some advice I can actually use.

Tongue Tied Teresa

Dear Tongue Tied:

You don't seem that shy to me. You're good at a job that requires person-to-person persuasion skills and dogged persistence. You asked me for advice and then warned me about what advice would be acceptable. So your shyness is fairly specific to *calling* strangers.

Your question ties directly into last month's column. If you will remember, in that article a passenger inquired about getting back into accounting after spending ten years as a programmer. You need a new job and are getting nowhere online, and she needs a career redirection and wonders why anyone would talk to her after ten years of "unrelated" experience.

The key for both of you is networking, instead of a strictly online search. Whether you use a job board or respond to specific job postings, to get a job online you need to be an

obvious candidate. Generalists and career switchers will find that channel particularly frustrating. There may be 200 or 20,000 people who are sorted for every “hit” a company decides to contact. That’s a lot of competition. You’ve heard that networking is the best way to find a job, and that is true, but you also believe that networking involves calling strangers, and that is where you’ve gone astray.

How do you build a network when you are shy, or when you believe that no one would want to talk to you anyway? That, my introspective Hamlet, is the question.

First of all, networking is about information, not power. You don’t need a rich uncle or a best friend whose wife is in charge of hiring in order to network. Janitors and secretaries and junior salespeople are great networking contacts. In fact, they often have more information about hiring at a company than distant executives who aren’t actively involved in staffing.

Social theorists have established that adult Americans know hundreds of people by name, and have access to lists of thousands of people. Even the shyest person has access to myriad contacts. Your old teachers or professors, colleagues at places where you used to work, friends from all phases of your life, acquaintances, members of your church or synagogue, neighbors, contacts on your friends list at friendster or LinkedIn and similar social networking sites, and people that you run into in your regular daily life are all networking contacts. These are not really strangers.

I’ve had clients who got jobs from leads that were originally provided by: a dogwalker, a personal trainer, a taxicab driver, a boss who had just fired my client, an ex-wife’s new husband, a woman in line at Starbucks, an elementary child’s teachers’ boyfriend’s tennis partner and, most amazingly of all, a wrong number call. So stop looking for powerful connections and start viewing *everyone you can come into contact with* as a potential referral source.

Many career books do differentiate networking sources like this:

Hiring Authorities – that would be somebody able to hire you on the spot, if you wow them enough.

Referral Sources – someone in the right industry but not a hiring authority.

Connectors – people who because of their personality or the structure of their jobs have abundant information valuable to you.

Everyone Else – and they do mean, everyone else.

In working with clients over the years, I have come to the conclusion that it is most valuable to treat *everyone* as the potential source of your new job. (This is particularly difficult to teach to executives, as it turns out. Some of them don’t want to believe that the mailboy has gossip that could be valuable to them.)

Next, don’t ask your contacts for a job or even about specific openings! The fastest way to a new job is not to ask for a job, but to ask for information and advice. It helps if you can ask about a specific employer or a specific type of opportunity. So instead of asking about vague ideas such as “something to do with kids” inquire about “opportunities to

work with public school kids in after-school programming in Chicago” or “opportunities to work in tutoring with gifted and talented students in grades 6 through 9.” The more specific your query, the more people will be willing and able to help you.

How do you make an initial query? When you can't talk to someone in the normal course of your day, use email. Email has replaced the telephone entirely for networking queries.

Here are my favorite networking questions:

When you want to gain access to a particular employer, ask everyone you know:

“Who do you know at _____ organization?”

When you want to get advice and counsel, ask for it!

“Who do you know who would know anything about _____?”

Here are some more:

“Do you know of any companies in this sector launching new offices, product lines, or other growth initiatives?”

“How did you get into this field? What steps do you think I would need to take to break into (or back into) this field?”

“I heard that you would need _____ credential. Do you think that is really true? Can you think of a shortcut that would allow me to get employed faster in this field?”

“What advice do you have for someone like me?”

Listen carefully to titles and jargon. An editorial assistant (entry level) is a very different position than an assistant editor (high level). Learn inside language, terms, and concepts, so you can sound like an insider.

If you ask fifty people in a row, it's the same as standing up in a crowded auditorium and asking, “Who in this room would know anything about opportunities to serve as an intern at the United Nations?” By using email and starting with well established relationships, a shy person can get access to the same information without having to actually speak to anybody, let alone a group of complete strangers.

Assume all companies are hiring at all times, *because they are*. Ask for referrals to people at any level in the industries that are of interest to you. Ask for permission before using someone's name. “May I use your name when I contact that person?” If you've been polite and to the point, *and you didn't ask for a job*, in your communiqués with Person A, she'll be much more comfortable giving you an email for Person B.

Your goal is to eventually ask this question: “After what I've learned from you, and my other research, I'd be very interested in applying for a job with your company in _____. Who would I talk to about that?” Then, with your refocused resume and your referral's introduction, you can skip that pile of 200 to 20,000 applicants.

Finally, I have this to say about Toastmasters: I think you're missing a major chance to overcome your fear of calling strangers. Toastmasters International is a fantastic organization that has helped millions of people develop public speaking skills. Sooner or later you are going to be called upon to be a trainer, to make a client presentation, or to

take a leadership role in an organization, and Toastmasters can help you shine when that moment comes. I hope you'll reconsider and check them out.

My best wishes for your continued success,

Donald Asher

Send your career emergency to don@donaldasher.com, and watch this space for Asher's response.

BIO: Donald Asher is a nationally known writer and speaker on careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Cracking the Hidden Job Market*; *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*; *Graduate Admissions Essays*, the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process; *Asher's Bible of Executive Resumes*; *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-Directed, Late Blooming, and Just Plain Different*; and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why* (named Business Book of the Year 2008 by national career columnist Joyce Lain Kennedy). Asher speaks over 100 days a year from coast to coast, to college and corporate audiences. He is eager to hear your career emergency.

SIDEBAR INSERT

Career Tip of the Month:

Networking is often the fastest way to a new job.

- Networking is about information, not power.
- Ask *everybody* for advice, ideas, leads, and referrals.
- Don't ask for a job! That's the quickest way to turn off a contact.
- Use email or social networking connections, instead of a telephone.
- Ask for permission before dropping someone's name.
- Follow up, follow up, follow up!

SIDEBAR

Hot Titles to Help You Network

If networking is not natural for you, try out the tips in these tomes:

The Networking Survival Guide and *Networking for Career Success*, by Diane Darling
Diane Darling is the guru and maven of networking. She speaks to corporate and civic groups nationwide on the topic. She simply "owns" this issue. Her ideas are clear, accessible, and presented in a light and humorous writing style. These two books together cover almost every application of networking.

How to Get Any Job with Any Major, by Donald Asher

Forgive me, dear readers, for shilling my own book, but this book tells you how to build a robust network, from scratch, in a business setting. Designed for college

students, it will work for anybody who doesn't know where to start. If you need new "business friends" ASAP, this is a strong road map to a new network.

Triumph Over Shyness, by Murray Stein and John Walker

A true "self help" book, this guide traces the causes of shyness. It discusses what treatments and approaches are available for those wishing to reduce their social anxiety, and it provides a series of exercises and activities that a shy person can employ on one's own to overcome limitations created by shyness.

Toastmaster's International Guide to Successful Speaking, by Jeff Slutsky and Michael Aun

If you want to overcome your fears of strangers and speaking in public, Toastmasters International is *the* group with the most experience helping others like yourself, and this is their guide. Even if you are afraid to speak in a small meeting, this guide can help you get started on business communications.