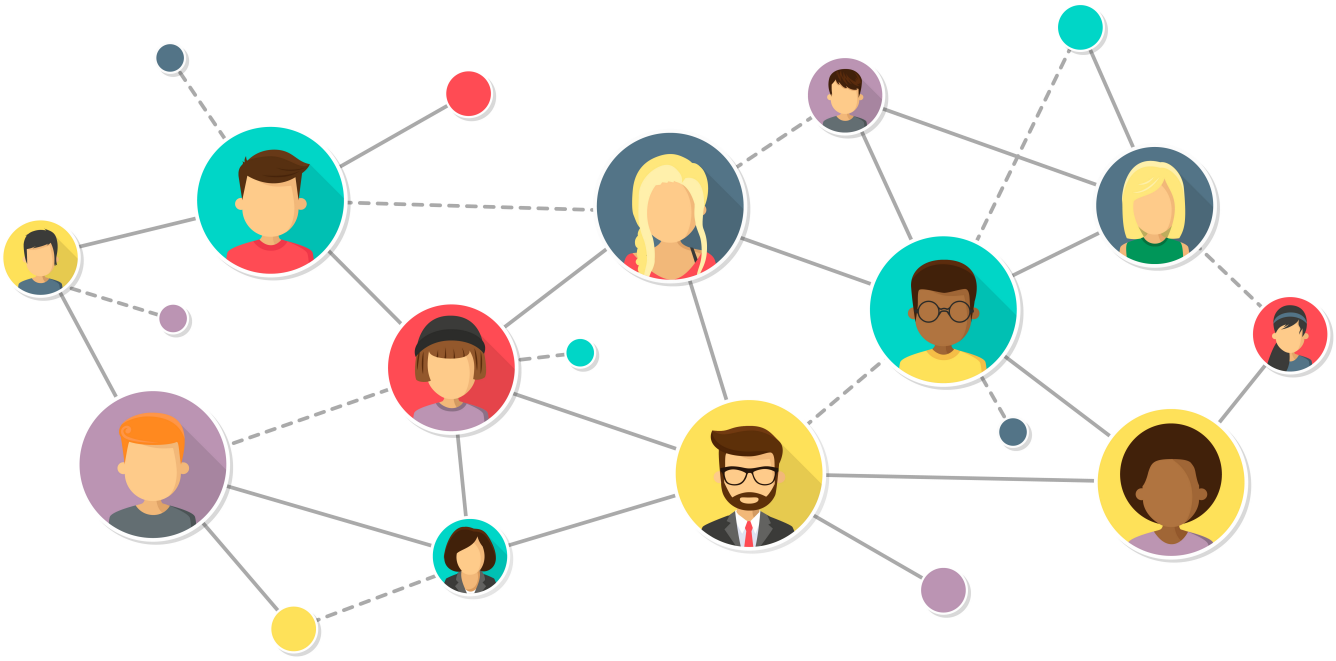


Networking 101

Career Development



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Lawyers enter the ranks of their profession alone.

For all the friends we find in law school, the bar exam is a solo effort. Each of us must demonstrate that we can think analytically and remember enough substantive law.

For all the colleagues we collect at work, the practice of law is often intensely solo. You read, you ponder, you tinker, and sometimes you are struck by inspiration.

For a while, it seems that your individual talents are decisive. The smarter and harder working you are, the farther you will progress.

And then you notice something odd. It is not only the most talented and most dedicated lawyers who advance. Sometimes individuals with fewer legal gifts nonetheless find favor.

There are many reasons for the discrepancy, of course. Probably as many reasons as there are individuals and settings. But what unites a surprising number of them is today's topic: networking.

Today the *Docket*'s Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau discusses networking with Abigail Tan, commercial counsel at Elastic NV and *Docket* contributor.

This is part one of a three-part series on **Interpersonal Influence at Work**. In part two, Bellerjeau and Tan discuss personal branding. In part three, they explore when and how to make use of your network and personal brand.

What does networking mean to you?

Bellerjeau: I started working as a lawyer in the early 1990s. Email and the Internet were a thing then, but networking to me meant personal connections. Who did I know and what could I learn from them?

Tan: Can you give me an example of what you mean?

Bellerjeau: Sure. I attended Albany Law School in upstate New York. Our graduates largely worked in the Albany area. As far as I could see, the most prestigious law firms paying the highest salaries were in Manhattan. Could someone from my school make their way to Wall Street?

Don’t be afraid to ask questions

Tan: How did you go about answering your question?

> You have to be willing to ask people for help, and then do so in a tactical way: the right person, the right time, and the right ask.

Bellerjeau: In my second year of law school, we had a visiting professor who just so happened to work at one of those Manhattan firms. One day I stayed after class and just asked him: “Prof. G., would your firm consider hiring someone from Albany Law School?” He had no idea but said he would find out.

Tan: What prompted you to ask him?

Bellerjeau: This was my first and probably most important lesson of networking. You have to be willing to ask people for help, and then do so in a tactical way: the right person, the right time, and the right ask. If you get those conditions right, you greatly increase your chances of making progress.



Don't be afraid to ask questions in order to get the answers and solutions you need. eamesBot / *Shutterstock.com*

Tan: Elaborate, please, what that meant in your case.

Bellerjeau: Prof. G. was the right person because he worked at a Manhattan firm. It was the right time because our paths intersected in a natural way. And I made the ask as simple as possible for him.

Tan: What do you mean, as simple as possible for him?

Bellerjeau: It's similar to getting the result you want at work. Make it easy for the person you're interacting with to say yes. Never ask an open-ended question that requires the person to do extra work. Don't ask for things that are unwarranted given the relationship. In this case, Prof. G. didn't know me well. If I had asked him for a job, the chances he would say no were very high. So, all I asked him was whether his firm would consider hiring someone.

Tan: Isn't that an open-ended question that required him to work?

Bellerjeau: Yes, but the task was simply to pass the question up to law firm management. And since the question was so broadly worded "Would you consider…" it was hard to reject out of hand. After all, even though they had never hired someone from Albany Law School before, surely there would be applicants they would consider.

Tan: What happened then?

Bellerjeau: Prof. G. came back after a bit and said, “Well, I talked with the firm. We’ve never done it, but we would consider hiring someone in the top five.” “The top five percent, I asked?” “No,” he said. “The top five students of the class.”

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Tan: Oh, boy, that’s not so helpful.

Bellerjeau: Ah, but you see, it was. Where formerly there was no obvious path forward, suddenly the unknown became known. Not only that, but the law firm having considered the question and set out relevant conditions, a person in the top five applying would have decent chances of success.

Tan: What else did your initial foray into personal networking teach you?

Stay aware of networking opportunities

Bellerjeau: Be alert to opportunities. Just like finding lost money, if you are always scanning the ground for coins, you are going to notice them far more often than people who aren’t looking.



Networking is about developing multiple meaningful relationships through others. eamesBot / *Shutterstock.com*

Tan: Are you saying good networking is a matter of luck more than skill? How do you identify the

right person, the right time, and the right ask?

Bellerjeau: Yes, luck plays a big part. But I like to think we can help luck find us. One great way is to simply be on the lookout for opportunities. The best networking opportunities are not forced. You meet someone because of a deal, a mutual friend, a common yoga class, whatever. You realize that person knows something or someone. And you go think of a way to apply Lesson 1: ask about something interesting in a tactical way. Often the initial ask is nothing more than an easy answer: how does X work at your company, or do you know someone I could ask about Y?

> Simply be on the lookout for opportunities.



Always be on the lookout for future opportunities that may present themselves. eamesBot / *Shuttestock.com*

Ask simple questions

Tan: It sounds like the encounters can be serendipitous and you don't ask for much.

Bellerjeau: Yes, but that doesn't mean you don't gain a lot. Let me give you an example from my in-house days. I wanted to expand my network of GC peers. I realized our board members all worked at or had affiliations with other companies. Why not simply ask them to put me in touch with their respective GC?

Tan: Did that work? What did it bring you?

Bellerjeau: Yes, it worked brilliantly. Directors want to show they can add value. In this case, the ask was simplicity itself. And the GCs were happy to make contact, or at least it was no burden to them to comply with a natural request from one of their directors. As to what it brought, among the group I developed a few close relationships that I kept throughout my entire career.

> If you have too firm an idea of what you want, you will miss adjacencies and alternatives that might be even more interesting than your original plan.

Tan: Did you have a specific long-term goal you're working towards when you asked your directors for help?

Bellerjeau: If luck can be engineered, the opportunities it kicks up are unpredictable, both in timing and in scope. If you have too firm an idea of what you want, you will miss adjacencies and alternatives that might be even more interesting than your original plan.

Back to my earlier analogy: if you tell yourself you're only searching for coins, you might overlook the US$20 bill, or the golden ring, or the lottery ticket. You get the idea. So yes, asking a simple question from a colleague who knows something you don't know can open up all sorts of doors.

Tan: Did you find networking changed as you grew in seniority?

Bellerjeau: Not really, at least not for me. I followed the same approach as a law student that I did after 20 years serving as a GC.

Tan: Is there such a thing as too much networking?

Bellerjeau: I'm sure there is, although I feel like I could have done more of it. I think it's not a question of frequency so much as your mindset. If you are focused on genuine connections with people, and not just how you can narrowly help yourself, you won't be networking too much.

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