

NETWORKING

The Full Playbook

A field guide for getting in the room
and making it count

READ THIS FIRST

It's Not You

If you've been applying to jobs and hearing nothing back, there is nothing wrong with you. You're not bad at this. The system you're using is broken — and it's broken on both sides.

On your side: job boards are a black hole. You apply, an ATS scans your resume for keywords, and you never hear from a human. Four thousand other people applied to the same posting using automated tools. Your resume was buried before anyone saw it.

On the company's side: hiring managers are drowning. They post a role and get thousands of robo-applications. AI bots are applying to jobs posted by AI HR systems — machines talking to machines with no humans in the loop. Some companies post jobs they've already filled, or post for posturing reasons with no intention of hiring. The people doing the hiring can't find the signal in the noise.

Nepworking exists because both sides of this equation are broken. When you bypass the portal and get a real conversation with a real person, you're solving the company's problem too. They want to find good people. You're making yourself findable.

This playbook gives you moves, words, and responses for many of the situations you're going to encounter. It works because it's the same play that experienced professionals have been running quietly for years — for the people they know. We wrote it down so anyone can use it.

What you do with it is on you. This playbook shows you where to point your effort — where it's going to make a difference, instead of shouting into a black hole. But the effort is yours.

The Setup

Stop looking for job postings. Start looking for companies.

Most job seekers have the sequence backwards. They find a posting, then research the company. By the time they've done that, four thousand other people have already applied and the ATS has already buried them.

Flip it. Pick a company — or five — that you actually want to work for. Research them. Understand what they do, who their competitors are, what their challenges are, where they're growing. Know the names of the people who run the functions you want to work in.

How to research a company in 20 minutes

You don't need to become an expert. You need enough info to have a real conversation.

Start with the annual report if the company is public. Not the whole thing — the CEO's letter at the front. It tells you what the company thinks it is, what it's proud of, and where it's going. It shows you the words they use to describe the company and their business.

That's for big companies. Looking at startups or smaller companies? The play is the same — research, learn the language, find a person. The details differ a bit. We cover that later in this playbook.

Then find a podcast interview or a video featuring a senior leader — maybe even someone in the function you want to work in. Pay attention to the specific words they use. How do they describe the company's mission? What problems do they talk about? What do they seem excited about?

Those words matter. The language a company uses to describe itself is the language you should use back to them. It's not flattery, it's fluency. When you walk into a conversation and use the same framing they use internally, you signal that you've paid attention.

When you do get in the room — and you will — you'll be demonstrating that you've done your homework. Don't underestimate how much that impresses someone. Doing this homework separates you from 90% of the field.

"I watched your CEO's talk at [conference] and the way he described [concept] really stuck with me — is that how the team thinks about it day to day?"

That one question does more work than a resume.

A note before we go further

This playbook gives you a better system. It does not give you a shortcut. The research, the outreach, the follow-through — that's real work, and nobody can do it for you.

In order to have success with the Networking approach, you have to do the homework, follow up when you say you will, and treat every conversation — even the ones that don't lead anywhere — as a chance to learn something.

The intro opens a door. What happens on the other side of it is entirely up to you.

Finding Your Way In

Who are you looking for?

Not HR. Not a recruiter. A hiring manager or a person in the function you want to work in. Doesn't have to be a senior person. Talking to literally anyone in the company is going to do 1000% more for your search than reading a job posting.

Working your network honestly

Most people underestimate their network because they're thinking too narrowly. You're not just looking for people who work at the company. You're looking for people who know people who work at the company.

Map it out in three tiers:

- **First degree:** People you know directly — family, friends, professors, former employers, coaches, neighbors.
- **Second degree:** People your first-degree contacts know. This is where LinkedIn becomes actually useful.
- **Third degree:** People two steps out. Yes, it's okay to reach this far. A warm intro two steps removed still beats a cold application by a mile.

When you find a name at a target company, work backwards. Who in your network might know them? Don't be shy about asking. The worst anyone says is no.

If you're starting from scratch

Not everyone starts with a deep bench. If you don't have family in the industry, if your parents didn't go to college, if you're in a new city with no connections — that's a real disadvantage. But thin doesn't mean empty. You have more network than you think.

- **Alumni networks.** Your college alumni database is underused. Search LinkedIn for alumni at your target companies. "I'm a fellow [School] alum and I'm trying to learn more about [Company]. Would you have 20 minutes?" The shared school is enough to get a yes.

— **People who post publicly.** If someone has been posting content for months, they're self-selected as people who like to share. Engage genuinely over a few weeks, then reach out.

— **Professors and former employers.** They know more people than you think. Ask directly who they'd suggest you talk to.

— **Cold outreach — done right.** "I read your piece on [topic] and it changed how I think about [thing]. I'm a recent grad trying to break into [field]. Would you have 20 minutes?" Specific. Easy to say yes to.

The path takes longer when you're building the network and working it at the same time. That's okay. Every conversation you have — even the ones that don't lead to a job — expands your map.

Getting the first conversation

This is often the hardest part. So make it easier on yourself — and on them — by not making it contingent on a job opening.

You're not asking for a job. You're not even asking about a job. You're interested in the company. You're asking for 20 minutes with someone who knows something you want to learn. That's a completely different ask, and almost anyone will say yes to it.

Most people genuinely like to talk about what they know. An informational interview is just a conversation. Casual. Low stakes. No obligation on either side.

The one rule: don't ambush them. If you get an intro and then immediately start asking whether they're hiring, you've turned a friendly conversation into an awkward one.

A word about why this feels hard

If the idea of asking someone for an introduction makes your stomach tighten, that's normal. You're doing something that feels vulnerable — asking for help from someone who might say no.

Here's what you should know: most people say yes. They remember what it was like to be starting out. They want to help. And asking someone to open a door for you is a much smaller ask than you think it is. The discomfort you're feeling is the gap between how big this feels to you and how small it feels to them.

The first time is the hardest. After that, it gets easier — fast.

The ask — how to request the intro

Most people get this wrong by being vague. "Can you put in a good word?" means nothing. Be specific.

"I'm targeting [Company]. I see you know [Name] there. Would you be comfortable introducing me? I'd love to have an informational conversation to learn more about the company."

"I've done a lot of research on [Company] and I'm really interested in their [specific team or function]. I see you know [Name] there. Would you be willing to make an introduction? At this point, I'm interested in learning more about the company."

That last line matters. You're not putting your contact in the position of vouching for a hire. You're asking for a door to be opened. That's a much easier ask.

A note if you're targeting startups

Everything in this playbook applies to startups too — but the dynamics shift. Smaller teams mean less bureaucracy and more direct access. Founders often hire for one thing above all: *do you care about the problem we're solving?*

That doesn't mean you should lead with "I'm passionate about your mission." That's too abstract, especially early in your career. Instead, show it: research the specific problem the company is tackling, understand how your role connects to it, and let that come through in conversation. "I read about how you're approaching [specific challenge] and I've been thinking about it" lands harder than "I love what you guys are doing."

The play is the same — find someone, get the conversation — but in a startup, that conversation is probably going to be with someone close to, or might even be, the founder. Come ready.

Your Skills Travel Further Than You Think

One of the biggest mistakes job seekers make is thinking too narrowly about what they're qualified for. You studied finance so you look for finance jobs. You interned at an agency so you search for agency roles. But the skills that actually make you valuable — communication, problem-solving, learning quickly, managing ambiguity — those aren't industry-specific. They're not even function-specific. A person who ran a campus organization, managed a retail team, or built something from scratch has skills that translate into dozens of roles they've never considered.

Startups understand this intuitively. When a founder is hiring for a ten-person team, they're not looking for someone who checks every box on a job spec — they're looking for someone who cares about the problem and can figure the rest out. The smaller the company, the more your adaptability matters and the less your exact title history does. Your network and your opportunities aren't limited to people in your exact field.

Every experience is a learning opportunity

But here's the part nobody wants to hear: transferable skills don't transfer themselves. You have to do the work of actually building them — and that means treating every experience you're in right now as a place to learn. Not just the glamorous parts. Not just the parts that line up with your dream job. All of it.

If you're in an internship that feels boring, find the thing in it that teaches you something. If you're in a job that isn't what you imagined, figure out what it's showing you about how organizations work, how decisions get made, how people communicate under pressure. There is always something to learn. Always. If you can't find it, the problem isn't the job.

The right effort, pointed in the right direction

This playbook gives you a better system. It does not give you a shortcut. The people who make Networking work are the ones who show up to conversations having done the research, who follow up when they say they will, who treat every interaction — even the ones that don't lead anywhere — as a chance to get better at this. The ones who don't do the work will have the same playbook and get different results.

The right effort, pointed in the right direction, compounds. That's what this playbook is for — not to do the work for you, but to make sure the work you're doing has a chance of actually paying off.

The Scenarios

Getting the intro is step one. Knowing how to handle what comes next is what actually gets you hired.

One principle to carry through every scenario below: **your job in every conversation isn't to get hired. It's to get to the next conversation.** Each good interaction opens the next door. That's how the process compounds.

Scenario 1: "Just send me your resume and I'll pass it to HR."

This sounds helpful. It's not. It puts you back in the pile. Your resume lands in HR with no context, no internal champion, and no reason to treat it differently from the thousand others they received this week.

"I really appreciate that. Before I do — would you be able to introduce me to someone who works in [department] for a quick conversation? Not even about a specific role. I just want to understand what the company's working on. Even 20 minutes would be incredibly helpful."

If they genuinely can't, take the HR path — but follow up with them directly after a week. They're still your internal advocate.

Scenario 2: "We're not really hiring right now."

This is not a no. This is an invitation to play a longer game.

"Totally understand. I'm not necessarily looking for an opening right now — I'm trying to learn about the company and the team. Would you have 20 minutes for a conversation? I'd rather know the people before there's a job posted than be a stranger when there is."

"Not hiring right now" changes faster than you think. And the person who already knows you has a massive head start when a role opens up.

Scenario 3: "So what are you looking for?"

Most candidates answer this badly. "I'm looking for a role in marketing" is not an answer. It's a category. Nobody gets hired into a category.

Lead with what you enjoyed, not a job title. It's positive, it shows growth mindset, and it turns the conversation back to you in a strong way.

"What I really enjoyed about my last role was [specific thing] — I found I was good at it and genuinely energized by it. The kind of work I'm looking for is probably something like [describe the work, not the title] — where I'd be [doing X, solving Y, building Z]."

Then flip it: "Does that kind of work exist here? Is there a team or a function where that would be useful?"

You've just made them think about where you'd fit rather than whether you fit a specific posted role. And you've done it by sharing energy, not reciting a resume.

Scenario 4: "What do you know about us?"

This is your moment. You've done the research. Use it.

Don't recite what the company does. Say something specific — a recent product launch, a strategic move, something from their last earnings call.

"I've been following you pretty closely. I was interested in [specific thing] — it seemed like a real shift in how you're thinking about [topic]. Is that representative of where the team is headed?"

Scenario 5: The conversation goes well. Keep momentum.

Don't leave without two things:

A specific next step. Not "I'll keep in touch." Something concrete: "Would it be okay if I followed up in a couple of weeks? And is there someone else on the team you think I should talk to?"

The referral ask. If the conversation went genuinely well: "I'd love to have a conversation with whoever leads [specific function]. Would you be comfortable making an introduction?"

Scenario 6: They ghost you after the intro.

It happens. Follow up once, after five to seven days. Short, warm, no guilt:

"Just bumping this up in case it got buried. Happy to work around your schedule — even a 15-minute call would be great."

If they don't respond, go back to your original contact: "I reached out to [Name] but haven't heard back — any chance you could nudge them?"

If it still goes nowhere, move on. Not every door opens.

Scenario 7: It's working. You're in the process.

Nepworking got you in the room. The conversations went well. Now you've been referred into the formal hiring process — an actual interview loop, maybe with HR, maybe with a panel. The Nepworking phase is over, but the mindset carries forward.

You already have an advantage. You're not a stranger. Someone inside the company knows you and is pulling for you. That changes how your resume gets read, how your interviews get scheduled, and how close calls get decided.

Stay in touch with your internal contact. Let them know you've moved into the formal process. A quick note — "I wanted to let you know they've scheduled me for interviews next week. Thanks again for making the connection" — keeps them in the loop and reminds them they have skin in the game.

Carry the research forward. Every conversation you had during the Nepworking phase gave you information that other candidates don't have. You know what the team cares about. You know the language they use. You know the problems they're trying to solve. Use all of it.

Don't revert to job-seeker mode. The formal process can make you feel like a supplicant again — sitting in a waiting room, answering behavioral questions, waiting for HR to call. Resist that. You got here by being a real person having real conversations. Keep being that person.

QUICK REFERENCE

What to Say When

| SITUATION | WHAT TO SAY |
|------------------------------|--|
| Asking for the intro | "Would you be comfortable introducing me? I'm not asking them to hire me — just to have a conversation." |
| "Send me your resume for HR" | "Would it be possible to get a quick conversation with someone on the team first? Not even about a specific role." |
| "We're not hiring" | "I'm not looking for a posting — I'd rather know the people before one opens up." |
| "What are you looking for?" | Lead with what you enjoyed, not a job title. Then ask where that kind of work lives in their company. |
| "What do you know about us?" | Say something specific and recent. Make it a conversation, not a quiz. |
| Keeping momentum | Leave with a concrete next step and ask for the next introduction. |
| Getting ghosted | One follow-up at 5–7 days. Then ask your original contact to nudge. Then move on. |
| Thin network | Alumni database, people who post publicly, professors, targeted cold outreach. |

For the Helpers

You're not doing them a favor. You're doing the work.

When you make an introduction, don't just forward an email and disappear. A good Networking intro has three parts:

The setup. Tell the person you're introducing them to what you know about the candidate — specifically. Not "she's great." Something real: "She ran the investment club at [school], did a summer at [firm], and is genuinely one of the more thoughtful young people I've met. I think it's worth 20 minutes."

The framing. Tell them what you're asking for. "I'm not asking you to hire her. Just a conversation." This lowers the bar to yes.

The follow-through. Check in with the candidate after a week. Did they connect? How did it go? You're not just opening a door — you're staying in the hallway long enough to make sure they got through it.

And if the person hasn't done the work? It's okay to say so. "I think you've got the raw material, but you need to do more research on the company before I'd feel comfortable making this introduction." That's not gatekeeping. That's coaching. And it's the most valuable thing you can do for someone who's almost ready but not quite there.

The long game

The introduction is the beginning, not the end. The most impactful thing a helper can do happens later — when a role opens up and you know someone who'd be a fit.

That's the moment to walk over to the recruiter's desk and say: "I know someone who applied for this. I've met them. They're worth a look." Or send a quick email to the hiring manager: "I introduced you to [Name] a few months ago — I see there's an opening on your team. I think they'd be strong."

This is the move that pulls a resume out of the pile. It transforms a cold application into a warm referral. And it's the kind of thing experienced professionals do instinctively for the people in their inner circle. Networking asks you to do it for people outside that circle too.

Who to extend this to

The easy thing is to do this for your own kids and their immediate friends. The more valuable thing — and the thing that makes Nepworking actually different from the old boys network — is to push your circle outward.

The intern at your company who doesn't have a parent in the industry. The kid who cold-emailed you because they did the research and found your name. The recent grad from your alma mater you've never met.

Three introductions a year. That's the ask. It costs you three emails and a few hours. For the people on the other end, it can change the trajectory.

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