

Why You Need a Career Mentor and How to Find One

If you reach out and ask the right questions, industry professionals can become allies during your job search and provide invaluable advice.

by *Sierra Tishgart*



Photo: Corbis Images

As you start your career, it's beneficial to foster a relationship with a superior in your industry. This can be someone you already know, like an internship supervisor, or a person that you admire but have never met. A mentor takes a personal interest in your ambitions, and what's important is that you put time and energy into a relationship with someone who genuinely cares about your career trajectory. But how do you approach the person who has your dream job? We've told you how to seek out mentors on your [college campus](#)—and now, we've asked the experts for their advice on pursuing professionals that can advise you throughout your career.

Start by asking family and friends for contacts.

"Family and friends are the first lines of contact," says [Stephanie Silverman](#), a public speaking coach whose clients include Cartier and CNN. "These are people who can vouch for you. Interview your family and friends: you may find that they have contacts they don't even realize would be useful to you. Also, connect with them on [LinkedIn](#) and mine their contacts for individuals you may want to meet."

Keep an eye out for networking opportunities.

"Great mentors can be found in a variety of places," says Lisa Quast, the founder and president of [Career Woman, Inc.](#) "In addition to workplaces, students can seek mentors at business associations in their area, non-profit organizations, church groups, or community groups such as business chambers of commerce."

Use your alumni network.

"Reaching out to alumni is a great way to start a relationship with something beyond just your interest in common," says Silverman. "People are naturally interested in seeing others from their school do well, and will be more willing to extend themselves with time, information, and connections."

Set up a meeting.

"Once you've identified a potential mentor, ask to meet," says Quast. "This meeting should take place somewhere that's mutually comfortable and where you can speak in confidence." (We suggest asking to meet in a coffee shop or offering to swing by his or her office.)

Identify your purpose.

"When you meet with a potential mentor, have clear ideas of what he or she can do for you that would be helpful," says Silverman. "The worst thing to do is show up and ask him or her to figure out what you need."



Prepare questions.

"Ask mentors for their opinions of the various pathways to success in their fields, and suggestions of activities or training that would make you a more desirable candidate," says Silverman. "It is also fine to ask, 'Is there anyone you can think of that you feel I should speak with here at [insert company]?' This gives your mentor the option to think about putting you in touch with another individual without the pressure of a direct request."

"You can also ask questions like, 'What did you wish you knew when you were just starting out?' 'How do you think the industry has changed since you began?' or 'Who was most influential to you in your career and why?'"

Don't be selfish.

"Taking interest in your mentor is important," says Silverman. "You will learn far more by asking questions and listening. Being aggressive is great, but when someone is helping you, it's important to be sensitive to what his or her boundaries are and know when to give space. All of these things will keep your contacts in a position of wanting to help."

Stay in touch over social media.

"You can respond to your mentor's tweets and share your own comments," says Quast. "But it's important for mentees to be careful never to cross the line of disrespect toward the mentor in social media interactions. Comments in any social media environment should always be censored for appropriateness."

Maintain professionalism.

"Building a mentor-mentee relationship is similar to building any type of personal relationship—it must be based on a foundation of mutual trust and open communication," says Quast. "Show up to meetings on time, actively listen and participate in conversations, be honest and truthful, keep discussions confidential, and treat the mentor with dignity and courtesy for his or her time and help."

