

Alumni Networking: The Art of the “Professional Coffee Chat”

by Julie Anna Alvarez

Most alumni job opportunities are not advertised and are filled through word-of-mouth referrals. One proven technique to maximize your potential of being referred is engaging in informational interviews or “professional coffee chats.”

The goal of a professional coffee chat (“PCC”) is building rapport with a professional to obtain information about a type of work and about the best ways to position yourself for consideration by relevant employers. Make a good impression, cultivate the relationship, and the professional will think of you when jobs come to his or her attention. These professionals are unlikely to offer you a position immediately; however, your contact may later introduce you to other professionals, forward your résumé, or contact you when an opportunity arises. PCCs work equally well for both seasoned and recent graduates.

The PCC process is a lot like gardening from seed planting to harvest. For “green thumb” PCC results, patiently follow these steps:

Choosing Seeds and Planting Area

Select professionals to target for outreach after determining the legal practice areas, work settings, and/or non-traditional career options you want to explore. Once your focus is determined, find the professionals with whom you want to speak. Some may already be in your circle of acquaintances, but new contacts should be sought. Law school alumni can begin by contacting fellow alumni in addition to alumni from their undergraduate institutions. Also consider professionals you

have encountered at lectures, networking events, in the course of your daily life, or through membership in relevant professional organizations. Every person is a potential contact. Develop your PCC strategy and obtain alumni lists or access to other resources with assistance from your law school’s career services professionals. Check the calendars of events for your law school and local bar associations to learn about events that might facilitate networking.

Planting Preparation

Prepare for the PCC before issuing the invitation — have your elevator pitch and questions ready. Spend time developing a flattering (and truthful) introduction of yourself, your education, and relevant work experience. Research your PCC prospect (employer website, Martindale.com, and LinkedIn are some sources) and plan questions you want to ask. Why? While your initial contact may be made via an emailed note, you will likely need to follow up by telephone. If the individual surprises you with: “I won’t have time to meet during the next several months, but I have a few minutes to chat with you right now,” you want to be in a position to dive in. Appropriate questions may focus on the person’s practice area and what the work really entails, how he/she entered that career, and what he/she sees as the essentials employers are seeking from someone transitioning to that field. You may ask for advice on working in that setting and about which professional organizations you should join. If you are meeting to discuss working at their organization (this may arise when you have an upcoming interview), you can

ask about the organization's culture, training and mentoring of employees, commitment to diversity, and the employer's hiring criteria. Once again, your law school career counselor can assist you in developing questions that will help with your overall transition strategy.

Sow ...

Make a contact asking for the meeting and follow-up. You can email contacts with a straightforward note (no résumé) requesting 20 minutes of their time for a professional chat to discuss their field over coffee near their office — your treat. If, after a week to ten business days, you have not heard back, you may want to forward your original email with a message indicating you recognize they are likely very busy and you understand, then state you are still interested in arranging for a chat when their calendar permits. Following another week or so phone them. When contacting someone regarding a PCC, keep in mind you are gathering information, not asking for a job. Be respectful of the other person's time. You know what it is like to be in their shoes as a busy professional with limited time. While it is appropriate to follow up with the contact if you have not heard from them after a reasonable period, emails or calls asking why they have not returned your call are never appropriate.

Tend ...

With questions in hand, you are ready to conduct your PCC and make a great first impression. Though this is not a job interview, you still want to dress professionally and behave courteously. Refrain from acting in an overly desperate or aggressive manner. Create rapport — it is a conversation, not a cross-examination! Listen and capture bits of information that will help you to cultivate this contact during the next step. After eliciting their wisdom, you should definitely ask the magic question that ensures your network grows: "Is there anyone else with whom you think I should speak?"

Cultivate ...

Follow up after the PCC and seek to cultivate this new professional relationship. Treat this professional the way you would like to be treated under similar circumstances. Send a thank-you note. Ask follow-up questions. Act upon advice that was given and inform the contact of your progress. You should use your judgment and need not take every piece of advice, but most tips offered during your PCCs will be worth taking. These interactions are not only polite but allow you to stay on your contact's radar.

Continue the cultivation process and have this professional get to know you, like you, and trust you as a fellow professional by communicating on a regular basis. A mix of email, phone, and occasional in-person contact will go a long way toward your contact being ready and willing to forward your résumé to a colleague or let you use their name when contacting someone else or alerting you to an unadvertised job opening. Get in touch about once a month. Make these contacts a two-way street. Seek small ways to give back and show your interest in your contact. Forward an article on a topic of interest, offer well wishes on a professional matter, send a holiday greeting, refer a networking contact who may be helpful to them or, if they are a practicing attorney, ask who their ideal client would be and refer a client (assuming that as a seasoned attorney your network puts you in a position to do so)!

Harvest ...

Gain your contact's good will as the professional relationship becomes more established and you gain their support in your career transition. Be ready to receive graciously and stay open to opportunities that will come through cultivating your professional contacts through PCCs. Keep an open mind and consider pursuing positions or contacts that may not immediately appear to be a perfect fit. In reaping your professional harvest,

always express gratitude and whenever possible pay it forward.

Creating a network is crucial to your job search. Remain aware of PCC opportunities to expand your networking garden. If you have found networking tedious or believe you are “not good at it,” keep trying — PCCs can be fun! A gardener does not know if every seed will sprout, but trusts the gardening process. You will not know which contacts will take root and blossom, but trust the PCC process and your end results will be bountiful.

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