

This May Be the Only Career Skill You Really Need



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“What do you really want to do with yourself?”

This innocent question asked by my Sydney-sider boss while I was working my way round the world ended with the answer “You know what Oprah does? That’s what I want to do.” What followed honed what was a skillset that has underpinned and taken my career in places I never thought possible... the Power of Asking.

Asking “Who do you know who works in radio?” first to my Dad and then to my Dad’s old MD, who was the most well connected person in Sydney my dad could think of, led me to my first job driving the sound desk for community radio station 2NSB-FM. (By the way “who do you know who...?” is my all-time favourite question.)

Asking “Can I pick your brains about getting into broadcasting?” on my return to the UK from my year out gave me the crucial advice about which courses were most employable and once I graduated gave me an extensive network to return to, to land my first, second and third jobs in broadcasting.

Then, having achieved my dream jobs of being a journalist at Scottish Television and BBC, I invited the head of the coaching service at the BBC to have lunch with me, to ask about the then new (and since award-winning) coaching programme they were launching. I got onto their internal leadership coach foundation programme and that gave me my big break into what I do now through The Career Coach - working with leaders and high potential staff who want to have rewarding careers and make a positive difference in their chosen field.

When to Ask

I have lost count of the number of times asking someone in my network – or complete strangers for that matter – has resulted in me hearing about jobs that were never advertised, about cross-departmental projects to develop new skills, land speaking engagements at prominent professional networking associations, and influence tricky leaders or colleague at work.

I have yet to discover the limits of Asking for any career or professional goal. (And in my personal life, in becoming a mum, I discovered it is also the best and shortest way to get advice, guidance, information or childminders/babysitters or anything else parenting related).

What are your career goals? Every answer you need is out there. My experience is far from “being a pest” those who have “been there done that” are often very willing to share their tricks, know-how and contacts as long as you are genuine.

The Two Golden Rules

1. Be shameless – Ask strangers, ask people you know, just ask! You and the person you’re speaking to are consenting adults. If they are busy or don’t want to speak to you, that’s fine. There will be someone else you can speak to. So get over your shyness. Just ask anyway. What is the worst that could happen? Exactly.

2. Give back – Euan Semple, one of my favourite bloggers as well as an ex BBC colleague says “The best networkers are savvy and common sense. It’s not a work style, it’s a lifestyle. Some of the best networkers don’t even know they’re networking. They’re just out there sharing ideas, sharing themselves and always looking out for opportunities for other people”. I love this quote. It’s become a personal mantra to ask myself “how can I give back to this person who has been so helpful?”. And if I don’t know, do you know what, I ask them. Most of the time I’m told “There’s nothing I need from you. It’s been a pleasure to meet you and share what I know with you”.

Today’s challenge – if you’re on!

Of course, LinkedIn wasn’t the amazing resource it is now in the late nineties when I was changing career. Being able to find decision makers, industry leaders, experts at the stroke of a mouse through discussion groups and LinkedIn’s search box makes all of this much easier.

I challenge you to stop for a moment and ask, “What’s one thing I want to know more about and who could help me?”

Reach out and ask for a quick conversation about it, even by telephone, Skype or by email, and ask away. Thank them. Tell them what you did with the advice or contact they gave you. And reflect on how generous a world we live in, that those we know and strangers alike are willing to share themselves and help us in many different ways.

Go on. Do it now, before the routine of your day grabs you. What’s the worst that will happen?