

The genius of 'Want to grab coffee?'



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In a few weeks, millions of college students will enter the real world with dreams of finding work that's meaningful and challenging—and preferably lucrative enough to live roommate-free in a major city. As they embark on their job searches, recent graduates are frequently given the vague advice to "go out and network."

But what exactly should this networking entail? What does one say to a perfect stranger whom one has cajoled into "grabbing coffee," while also telepathically conveying one's desire for a job?

Science has one piece of advice, which is this: Ask them for advice.

Far from inconveniencing or annoying the advice-giver, research shows that asking for advice appears to boost perceptions of intelligence.

The Harvard behavioral science professors Alison Wood Brooks and Francesca Gino and the Wharton business professor Maurice Schweitzer discovered this phenomenon through a series of experiments they conducted over the past few years.

Here's how they described the first one, [in *Scientific American*](#):

We asked 199 students to complete a “challenging brainteaser” that consisted of seven IQ test questions. We told half of the subjects that they would be paid \$1 for each correct answer. We told the other half that they would be paid based on a partner's rating of their competence on a scale from 1 to 7 and would earn \$1 for each point on the rating scale. Before answering the questions, participants could send a message to their partner, who had purportedly completed the brainteaser earlier. They could ask their partner for advice (“Hey, can you give me any advice?”), send no message or send a neutral greeting (“Hey, I hope you did well”).

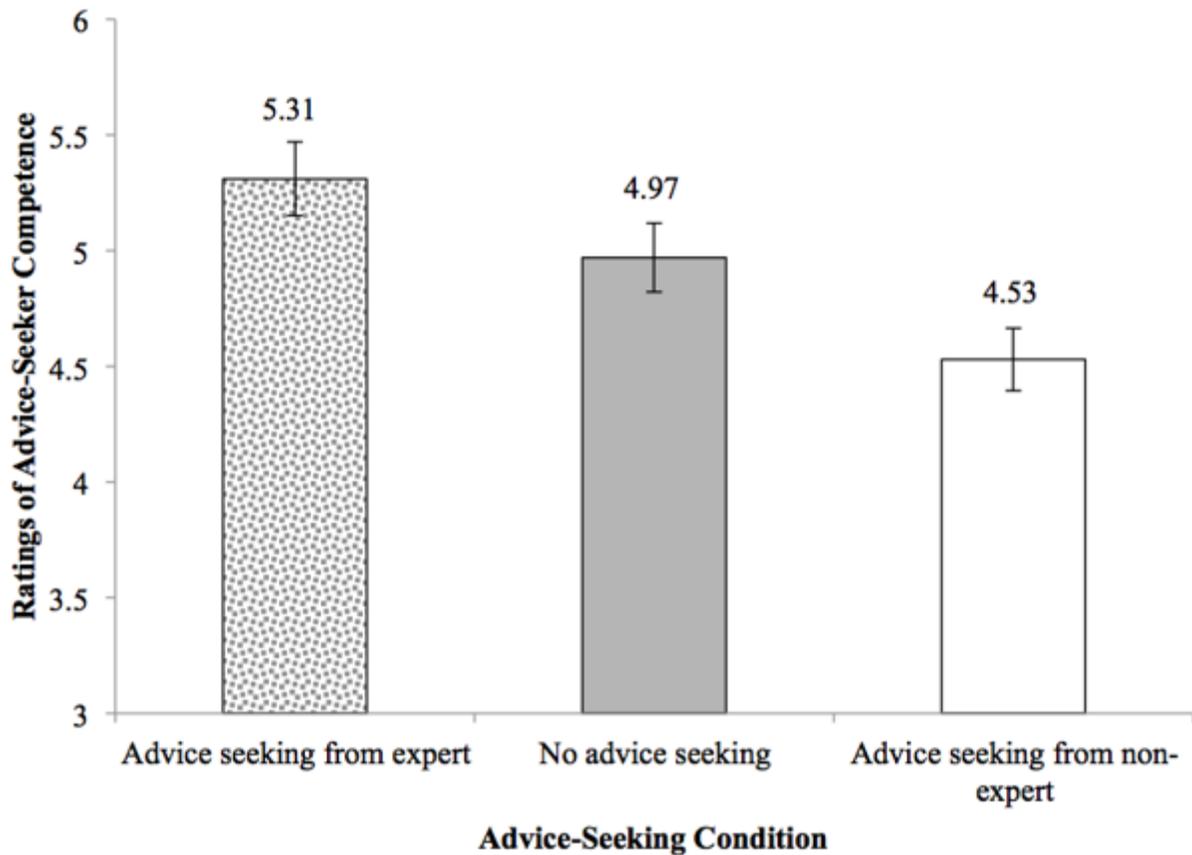
It turned out that the people who were trying to appear more competent, rather than simply correct, were twice as likely to ask their partners for advice.

Follow-up experiments lent support. People who sent their fellow participants a text message asking for advice on a brainteaser were rated as smarter than those who sent generic, positive messages. (However, this worked best when the task was truly difficult.)

Importantly, asking for advice only made the participants seem smarter when they asked about something the mentor was a self-identified expert in. When the mentors were asked to weigh in on topics they had no knowledge of, the advice seeker was seen as less competent.

Ratings of Competence Based on Advice-Seeking

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Management Science

For people in need of guidance, the good news is that asking an expert for advice, generally, can only help. The bad news is that this does not mean humans are a bunch of altruistic saints who will help whoever they can. Instead, it appears that advice-seeking is just a more subtle form of ego-stroking.

The authors think that asking for advice is effective because it fluffs the self-confidence of the advisor, "which in turn boosted the advisor's positive perceptions of the advice seeker," they write in their study, which was published in *Management Science*. "I.e., 'S/he was smart to ask for my advice because I am smart.'"

Just like [monkeys prefer peers](#) that imitate them, humans tend to like people who (at least feign to) respect us. It's more evidence that, at least in the business world, flattery will get you everywhere—and a nugget or two of wisdom, too.

Read [The Genius of 'Want to Grab Coffee?'](#) on [theatlantic.com](#)

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