A Simple Phrase for Getting Better Help

By Ko Kuwabara, INSEAD; Yejin Park, Stern School of Business; and Kelly Nault, IE Business School

Making generalised, not personalised, help requests can improve the quality of help received.

Giving and receiving help are essential aspects of organisational life, whether that’s providing career advice or soliciting a colleague’s input on a tricky technical problem that you just can’t solve on your own. Through help exchange, individuals gain access to ideas, resources and relationships that help them complete tasks more efficiently and effectively than if working alone.

However, a growing body of research has documented various ways in which people routinely fail to seek or offer help due to systemic misperceptions – namely, discrepancies in what help requesters and requestees believe are expected from each other. Individuals could be reluctant to ask for help because they think they are bothering others or due to a fear of being perceived as needy, entitled or incompetent. People may also fail to provide their assistance as they believe that offering unsolicited
help may come off as insulting or presumptuous.

In our research, recently published in Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, we examine why these misperceptions might prevent us from accessing and leveraging indirect ties who can potentially offer better help, ideas or opportunities than our direct contacts. We propose solutions to facilitate better help exchange across networks and overcome referral aversion – the fear of negative judgment for offering an unsolicited referral instead of direct help.

**Referral aversion in third-party help exchange**

Imagine that one of your colleagues comes to you for assistance on a new project. Should you offer to help them yourself or to help connect them with someone you know who is more willing and able to help? Decades of research indicates that, paradoxically, our closest contacts – those we know and trust the most – are often the least helpful insofar as they reside in our very own silos. Conversely, our networks at work are so critical, largely because they help us reach new people with new ideas, opportunities and resources. If you know 10 people, and each of them knows 10 people, that is 90 new people you can potentially access through your network.

Yet, our research suggests multiple reasons why our networks might actually prevent us from reaching indirect contacts for help. One obvious reason is that there may be no suitable third party available to help. Another is that many of us don’t naturally think about asking other people when a colleague comes to us for help. Our research examines a third and less obvious possibility – referrals may not occur even when there are willing and capable third parties due to what we term referral aversion. This refers to concerns or discomfort felt by those who are asked for help (requestees) regarding how those requesting help (requesters) might react to them if offered a referral rather than direct help in response to a help request.

Referral aversion stems from concerns about whether offering an unsolicited referral instead of direct help may wrongly or inadvertently signal incompetence or a lack of care for the person asking for help and undermine the relationship. Referral aversion can prompt people to offer help directly at
their own expense instead of referring third parties, causing chains of help exchange to “short circuit” without reaching someone potentially more willing and able to help.

**The effect of generalised help requests**

We conducted seven studies to examine the effect of referral aversion on help exchange. Overall, our results revealed that requestees overestimated how negatively they would be judged (i.e. unappreciated and viewed as cold, incompetent and distant) by help requesters for offering unsolicited referrals instead of helping directly. Ironically, our findings also showed that this referral aversion seemed to be largely unwarranted: requesters appreciated referrals more than requestees believed.

We also found that a surprisingly simple intervention – making generalised rather than personalised help requests – (asking for help from “you or someone you know” instead of just “you”) – could reduce requestees’ referral aversion and elicit better help. Generalised help requests increased the quality of help received, not only from third parties but also from requestees, as the possibility of referral allowed requestees to enlist someone more competent unless they felt competent themselves.

For instance, in one of our studies, we examined the effect of making a generalised help request in a field setting. Participants were asked to solve eight questions on music theory (e.g. identifying intervals, scales and compositions). After completing the trivia questions, we gave participants an optional bonus round where they could send an email containing either a personalised or generalised help request to an acquaintance to complete the same questions.

We found that generalised help requests produced higher quality help. Participants who made such requests received more correct answers on the trivia quiz, not only from third parties but also from requestees who chose to help directly. The results show that simply rephrasing a help request can be an effective strategy for promoting third-party help exchange.

**Key implications for professionals**
Although research on social capital has long emphasised the importance of having connections that provide broad access and exposure to relational resources in networks, there is also a growing recognition that the process of exchange, particularly with or through intermediaries, is more complicated and hardly automatic. Instead, it can be fraught with misperceptions and miscommunication – having friends, or friends of friends, does not ensure access to social capital if one party is not willing, able or available to help.

The idea of referral aversion highlights the importance of understanding social processes underlying how people exchange social capital – and how they might fail. With respect to giving help, our research demonstrates the viability of offering an unsolicited referral as an alternative to direct help. The notion that making a referral could benefit requesters without undermining one’s standing or relationship with them is a welcome insight for anyone feeling overburdened by help requests or underqualified to offer effective help in the workplace.

With respect to help-seeking, our research demonstrates the efficacy of making a generalised help request to solicit referrals and mobilise social capital. By merely changing the framing of the help request, requesters can alleviate requestees’ referral aversion and nudge them to search more broadly for high-quality help, thereby creating a mutually beneficial scenario.

Many individuals tend to overthink the situation when asked for help. They could have the impression that being a good co-worker or organisational citizen requires providing help directly, or they may worry that they will be perceived in a negative light if they are unable to personally provide the help that’s being requested.

The next time you’re asked for help, think of whether someone in your network may be willing and better placed to offer a hand. If you make a referral, then it could create a win-win situation for you and the requester. The latter will be appreciative of you offering other ideas for solutions rather than denying the request, and you don’t have to struggle through a problem or issue that you may not be equipped to tackle.
On the requester’s end, the simple act of tweaking your help request to include the phrase “from you or someone you know” can help prompt the person you’re asking for help to think more broadly about the request. This can lead to the formation of new connections, ideas and solutions, which is the gist of successful networking.

Find article at
https://knowledge.insead.edu/strategy/simple-phrase-getting-better-help

About the author(s)

Ko Kuwabara is an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD.

Yejin Park is a PhD student at Stern School of Business.

Kelly Nault is an Assistant Professor of Human Resources and Organisational Behaviour at IE Business School.

About the research

"When brokers don’t broker: Mitigating referral aversion in third-party help exchange" is published in Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes.