
// pillar 3 deep dive

Warm paths



Work at companies where you already know someone. Referrals get you past the pile, and references close the deal, so this is the highest-converting channel in your whole search.

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This is pillar three, where you work your warm leads: the companies the pipeline tagged Warm because you already know someone there. Warm paths convert at far higher rates than anything else, so this is the highest-leverage channel in the whole search. By the end you will know exactly how to turn a connection into a referral, and how to line up references that seal the offer.

Why warm paths win

The single biggest lever in a job search is a referral. Referred candidates get interviewed and hired at dramatically higher rates than cold applicants, because a referral is a trusted human vouching for you. That vouch jumps you past the resume pile and the applicant tracking system entirely, and lands you in front of a person who is already inclined to say yes.

You already did the hard part. The pillar two pipeline tagged every job Warm where you have a connection, so you are not starting from a blank page. This pillar is simply about converting those warm tags into referrals and interviews.

A referral is the closest thing to a cheat code in the job search. One trusted person saying “talk to this candidate” beats a hundred cold applications.

Who counts as a warm path

Warmth is a spectrum, and more people count than you think:

- ▶ **First-degree connections who work at the company.** The strongest path.
- ▶ **Someone one step away.** A connection who knows someone there, which becomes a second-degree introduction.
- ▶ **Former colleagues, classmates, and cohort-mates,** plus people you have met in communities or online.
- ▶ **Anyone who has seen your work.** Your building-in-public from pillar one turns strangers into people comfortable vouching for you.

Even a loose connection who respects your work is warmer than a cold portal application. Start with the strongest and work outward.

Before you ask: make yourself easy to refer

A referral is someone putting their reputation on the line for you, so your job is to make that a no-brainer. Before you send a single ask, have three things ready: your one-pager from pillar one (Signal Project, design doc, resume, LinkedIn), the specific role and its link so they never have to hunt, and a public track record of your work so vouching for you feels safe.

How to ask for a referral

The principle is simple: make it easy, specific, and low-pressure. Do not ask someone to "help you find a job." Ask them to refer you to a specific role, and hand them everything they need to do it in thirty seconds.

▪ The structure of a good ask

Reconnect briefly and genuinely if it has been a while. Name the exact role and its link. Make it effortless by giving them a short blurb they can paste plus your one-pager. And keep the pressure off by acknowledging it is a favor and giving them an easy out.

THE REFERRAL ASK

"Hey [name], hope you're doing well [+ a genuine line if it's been a while]. I saw [Company] is hiring a [role]: [link]. I'd love to be considered, and a referral from you would mean a lot. I've written a short blurb you can paste into the referral system, plus a one-pager on my work, below. No pressure at all if it's not a fit for you to refer."

▪ Give them a copy-paste blurb

The move that makes referrals easy is to write it for them. Hand them a few sentences they can paste straight into their company's referral system or forward to the hiring manager, so they barely have to think:

THE BLURB YOU HAND THEM

"[Your name] is an AI engineer who recently built [Signal Project], a [one line on what it does] that [result or traction]. They'd be a strong fit for the [role] because [one or two reasons tied to the role]. Repo and write-up: [links]. Resume: [link]."

Referral codes and links

Many companies run an employee referral program with a code or a link, and a referral submitted through it is what actually counts internally (it also usually earns your connection a bonus, so it is a genuine win for them too). When someone is willing, ask directly: can you refer me through your internal system, or share the referral link? If they are not sure how, point them to it gently, since most companies have an internal referral portal that takes them two minutes.

No direct connection? Get the intro

If your connection does not work at the company but knows someone who does, ask for an introduction, not a referral. The clean way to do it is a double opt-in intro: ask your connection to check with their contact first, and only connect you if the contact

is open to it. It is polite, it protects everyone, and it works. Something like: "Would you be comfortable introducing me to [contact] at [company]? Totally fine to check with them first, and no worries if it's not a fit."

Work your warm leads like a system

You have a list of warm-tagged jobs from the pipeline, so work it deliberately rather than at random:

- ▶ Prioritize your warm leads first, since they convert best of anything you can do.
- ▶ **Log every ask in your tracker's Outreach Log** (channel: referral ask), and follow up on the ones that go quiet.
- ▶ **Protect the relationship:** one thoughtful ask per person, always thank them, and keep them posted, because people love hearing they helped.
- ▶ **Reciprocate.** Offer to help them back. A warm network is something you maintain, not something you spend.

References: line them up early

References are not the same as referrals. A referral gets you in the door at the start; a reference vouches for you when a company checks near the end. Lining them up early and prepping them well can be the thing that seals an offer.

▪ Who to ask

Former managers are the strongest, followed by senior colleagues and mentors. If you are earlier in your career, people who have worked closely with you or seen your work in depth also count. Choose people who will speak specifically and positively, not just politely, and aim to have three or four ready.

▪ How to ask

Ask early, before you actually need them, and confirm they are willing to give a strong reference, giving them an easy out if they hesitate at all. A lukewarm reference is worse than none, so you want people who are genuinely in your corner.

▪ Prep them to close the deal

When a reference check is coming, do not leave them to wing it. Send each reference the role, what the company cares about, and the one or two things you would love them to emphasize, tied to the job. A prepped reference who speaks to exactly what the company wants is worth far more than a generic "they were great to work with."

PREP YOUR REFERENCE — SEND THEM

The role and company, and that a reference check is coming soon.

What the company cares about most (from the job description and your interviews).

The one or two things you'd love them to emphasize, tied to that role.

A quick reminder of a project or moment that shows it.

Common mistakes to avoid

- ▶ **Vague asks.** “Let me know if you hear of anything” puts the work on them and goes nowhere. Name a specific role.
- ▶ **Making the referrer do the work.** No blurb, no role link, no one-pager means no referral.
- ▶ **Cold-asking strangers.** Build a little rapport or show your work first; do not ask someone who has never heard of you to stake their name on you.
- ▶ **Burning goodwill.** Mass, impersonal asks damage the relationships that are your best asset.
- ▶ **Forgetting to follow up and thank people.** The follow-through is what keeps the network warm.
- ▶ **Scrambling for references at the last minute,** or handing over an unprepped reference who gives a generic answer.

What you should have before moving on

By the end of pillar three, you should have:

- ▶ A prioritized list of warm leads, straight from the pipeline.
- ▶ Your referral ask and copy-paste blurb, ready to personalize per company.
- ▶ Referral asks sent and logged for your top warm leads, with follow-ups scheduled.
- ▶ Introductions requested where you are one step away.
- ▶ Three or four references lined up, willing, and ready to be prepped.

With your warm leads working, you turn to the companies where you do not have an in, and go get to the decision maker directly.

→ **With your warm leads working, move on to Pillar 4: Cold Paths to Decision Makers.**