

// pillar 4 deep dive

Cold paths



The companies where you have no connection. The exact playbook for finding the right people and their emails, and reaching them directly, with Sales Navigator, Hunter.io, and Apollo.

baswe.ai // become a software engineer

This is pillar four, where you work your cold leads: the companies where you have no connection. Instead of applying into the void, you find the exact person who can hire you, get their email or message them directly, and lead with your work. This is the deep-dive version, with the precise tool workflows and a full set of email and InMail templates.

The cold-path principle

For a cold lead, the apply button is the black hole. The play is to get your work in front of a specific human who can act on it. You are not asking for a job. You are an engineer showing someone a system you built for a problem their company has.

For a cold lead, do not apply and wait. Find the decision maker, reach them directly, and lead with your work, not a resume.

Who to target: go wider than the job poster

Most people only ever try the recruiter. There are far more doors, and several convert better. Group your targets like this:

- **People who own or influence the role**

Hiring manager or engineering manager. The person who owns the role and makes the call, usually the manager of the team you would join. Your best single target.

Whoever is named on the posting. Many job posts name the team, the manager, or the person who posted it. Start there.

The founder or CTO, at small startups. At seed and Series A companies, the founder or CTO is the hiring manager, and they are surprisingly reachable and love talking to builders.

- **Peers who can pull you in**

Lead, staff, and senior engineers on the team. Your future teammates. They can refer you internally, they will give you the real scoop, and they are often more responsive than managers.

Recently-hired engineers. Someone who joined the team in the last few months just went through the exact process, tends to be friendly, and will often refer a strong candidate.

- **The talent side**

In-house recruiter or talent partner. They source and screen, and a good one can champion you straight to the hiring manager.

Head of People or Talent, at small companies. At a small startup there may be one person who runs all hiring. Reaching them covers everything.

Agency recruiters and their account managers. External recruiters place candidates at many companies at once, so one relationship can open several doors. Their account managers own the client relationships and know exactly who is hiring right now.

- **Semi-warm angles, even on a cold company**

- ▶ **Alumni.** Anyone from your school, bootcamp, or a past employer who now works there. Shared background makes a cold message half-warm.
- ▶ **People who engaged with your content.** Anyone who liked or commented on your posts is already a warm-ish contact.
- ▶ **Speakers, authors, and open-source maintainers** in your niche. They know who is hiring and are used to being contacted about work.
- ▶ **A second-degree path to the hiring manager.** If a connection knows them, get an intro instead (see pillar three). Always prefer an intro to a cold message.

Unique angles that get replies

Cold does not have to mean generic. These angles consistently lift reply rates:

- ▶ **Engage before you message.** Leave a genuine, specific comment on their post or their company's, then reach out a day later. You are no longer a stranger.
- ▶ **Reference a real technical decision they made.** "I noticed you moved from fine-tuning to RAG, I hit the same tradeoff building X." It proves you did the work.
- ▶ **Lead with value, not just an ask.** Share a relevant insight, a small fix, or a resource. Contribute to their open source. Give before you ask.
- ▶ **Time it to a trigger.** Reach out right after a funding round, a product launch, or a new-team announcement. They are about to hire.
- ▶ **Go up, not just across.** At small companies, message the founder directly. Fewer gatekeepers, faster decisions.

Find emails, method 1: LinkedIn + company site + Hunter.io

This is the free-ish manual method, and it works for almost anyone. The idea: find the person, find the company's email pattern, build their address, and verify it.

1 · Find the person. On LinkedIn, confirm their exact name, current company, and title. Note the spelling.

2 · Get the company domain. From the company's website or its LinkedIn page (for example acme.com).

3 · Run a Domain Search in Hunter.io. Enter the domain. Hunter returns known emails at that company and, crucially, the email pattern it uses, for example {first}.{last}@acme.com or {first}@acme.com.

4 · Run the Email Finder. Enter the person's first name, last name, and the domain. Hunter guesses their address and gives a confidence score.

5 · Verify. Paste the address into Hunter's Email Verifier. A high-confidence, deliverable result is safe to send; a "catch-all" is riskier, so treat it as a maybe.

6 · Fallbacks. If Hunter is unsure, apply the company's pattern to the name yourself, then verify. Also check the person's GitHub, personal site, or X bio, where engineers often list an email.

The free tier gives you a limited number of searches a month, so spend them on your highest-value targets, the hiring manager and the lead engineer first.

Find emails, method 2: Apollo

Apollo is a contact database that hands you verified emails (and often a phone number) directly, which makes it faster than the manual method when it has the person.

1 · Search People. Filter by Company (your target), Job titles, Seniority or Management level, and Department (for example Engineering, or Human Resources for recruiters). Add keywords like "AI" or "machine learning."

2 · Reveal the email. Open a matching person and click to access their email; Apollo shows a verified address and often a LinkedIn URL and phone.

3 · Use the Chrome extension. Install it, and Apollo overlays the person's email and details right on their LinkedIn profile while you browse, so you never leave the page.

4 · Save to a list. Group your target people per company so you can work through them and track who you have contacted.

The free plan gives a monthly credit allowance, so verify before you send and reserve credits for the people who matter most.

Sales Navigator: reach anyone at a target company

LinkedIn Sales Navigator is the paid tier built for finding and messaging specific people. Regular search is too blunt for this; Sales Navigator lets you pinpoint the exact person and message them with InMail even when you are not connected. It has a free trial, and for an active search it pays for itself. Here is the core workflow, then how to aim it at each persona.

▪ The core workflow

Filter to the person. Use Current company, Job title, Function, Seniority level, Geography, and Keywords to narrow from a company to the handful of people who matter.

Save leads into a list. Build one lead list per target company, and save your searches so new matches surface automatically.

Message with InMail. InMail reaches people outside your network. You get a limited number a month, so spend them on the highest-value people first, and watch for “Open Profile” members, who can be messaged for free.

- **Reach a hiring manager at a specific company**

Set Current company to the target, Function to Engineering, and Seniority to Manager or Director, then scan titles like Engineering Manager, Head of AI, Director of Engineering, or VP Engineering. Cross-reference with the actual open role: the posting usually hints at the team, so pick the manager who owns it. Message that person, not a generic address.

- **Reach a lead or senior engineer on the team**

Same company filter, Function Engineering, and titles like Staff Engineer, Lead Engineer, or Senior AI Engineer. Use the “posted on LinkedIn recently” filter to find the active, reachable ones. This is a peer-to-peer message: you are a fellow builder asking for their perspective, and they can refer you in.

- **Reach an agency account manager or recruiter**

Two ways in. First, search recruiting and staffing agencies that specialize in AI or ML placement (search the agency by name, or by keywords like “AI recruiter” or “ML talent”), then filter titles to Account Manager, Client Partner, Delivery Manager, or Technical Recruiter. Second, when you see a recruiter posting AI-engineering roles in your feed, save them. One good agency relationship can put you in front of several of their clients at once, so treat these as long-term, not one-off.

Messaging templates

Every template leads with your work and keeps the ask light. Personalize the opening line, that first line is what earns the reply.

INMAIL · HIRING MANAGER

“Hi [name], I saw [company] is [specific: scaling retrieval / shipping agents / hiring AI engineers].

I built [Signal Project], a [one line] that [result]. Repo and write-up: [link].

I'd love your feedback, and if you're hiring for something like this, I'd be glad to talk.”

INMAIL · LEAD / SENIOR ENGINEER

“Hi [name], I really liked [their post / your team's work on X]. I've been building in the same space, an assistant that [result], and I'd love your take on how your team handles [specific problem].

If you're open to a quick chat, or the team's hiring, I'd love to connect. Repo: [link].”

INMAIL / MESSAGE · AGENCY RECRUITER OR ACCOUNT MANAGER

"Hi [name], I'm an AI engineer actively on the market (mid-level, targeting LLM and AI engineering roles).

I recently shipped [Signal Project], a [one line] that [result]: [link].

If you place candidates like me, I'd love to be on your radar, and I'm happy to share exactly what I'm targeting."

EMAIL · HIRING MANAGER

Subject: AI engineer, built [X] for [their problem]

"Hi [name], I saw [company] is [specific]. I built [Signal Project] to tackle [problem], with [key decision or result]: [links].

It's picked up [stars / users / feedback] since launch. I'd love your feedback, and if your team is hiring AI engineers, I'd be glad to talk.

Best, [name] · [repo] · [LinkedIn]"

THE FOLLOW-UP (day 3-4, then day 8-10)

"Hi [name], following up on my note below. I'd still love your take on [X].

Quick update: I've since [new detail, e.g. added evals; it's now at ~200 stars]. No worries at all if the timing's off."

Multi-channel and cadence

Reach the same person on LinkedIn and by email; the combination gets far more replies than either alone. Then follow up on a simple cadence: the first touch on day zero, a short follow-up around day three or four, another around day eight to ten, and a final one near day fourteen. Keep each brief, add a little value, and give an easy out. Log every touch in your tracker's Outreach Log, and for a cold lead, apply through the portal too, since the outreach and the application go together as one play.

Work your cold leads like a system

Run this against the cold-tagged rows from your pipeline, in batches:

- ▶ Prioritize by fit and by how reachable the decision maker is.
- ▶ **Batch it:** find the people in Sales Navigator, pull emails with Hunter or Apollo, send, log, and follow up.
- ▶ **Watch your reply rate.** If it is low, tighten the targeting or the opening line before you send more.

Common mistakes to avoid

- ▶ **Applying and waiting.** For a cold lead, the portal alone is the void.
- ▶ **Leading with the ask.** Opening with "please hire me" or a resume attachment gets ignored. Lead with the work.
- ▶ **Generic blasts.** A copy-paste message with no specific first line reads as spam.

- ▶ **One channel, or one person.** Use LinkedIn and email, and reach both the manager and a peer.
- ▶ **No follow-up.** Most replies come on the second or third touch.
- ▶ **Sending unverified emails.** Always verify; bouncing hurts your sender reputation and your credibility.

What you should have before moving on

By the end of pillar four, you should have:

- ▶ Sales Navigator set up (or on a trial), with a lead list per target company.
- ▶ The right people identified for your top cold leads: a hiring manager, a peer engineer, and a recruiter.
- ▶ Verified emails via Hunter.io or Apollo where you want the inbox.
- ▶ Your outreach personalized and sent across LinkedIn and email, logged, with follow-ups scheduled.
- ▶ At least one agency recruiter or account manager relationship started.

With both your warm and cold leads working, the interviews and offers start coming. The last pillar is turning those offers into the best possible deal.

→ **With offers coming in, move on to Pillar 5: Negotiate.**