ASK ELLEN – using LinkedIn to contact a hiring manager for a specific job

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Q: What are your thoughts on using LinkedIn to find and talk to potential hiring managers at places you’ve applied to? For example, I’ve recently applied for what I consider to be a dream job; the position is one of the reasons I went to library school. I haven’t heard anything back yet (it’s only been a week); a friend suggested I find the hiring manager on LinkedIn and try to connect that way. The place I’d applied to though is a large corporation; I really don’t know who the hiring manager would even be. The corporate website only lists VPs & SVPs, who I have found on LI. So, long story short: is it a gamble worth taking, introducing myself that way to people who may have no influence over the process?

A: I wouldn’t do it, for a few reasons. First, as you noted, you might target the wrong person (“…who may have no influence over the process”), so that would simply be wasted time and energy.

Also, even if you’ve found the right person, this is not the contact the employer wants, for applicants for that particular job. The employer wants applicants to follow the application instructions. If employers want to talk with an applicant, they will contact that person; that’s how it works. Someone contacting the hiring manager directly would not be gaining an advantage, and may well be annoying him/her. What if there were 100 applicants (a low estimate, by the way, for many positions) and even 1/5 of them contacted the hiring manager in some way to try to get a foot in the door? That’s 20 extra phone calls or e-mails or messages via LinkedIn that have to be dealt with in some way. If it became known that this actually gave applicants an advantage, everyone would disregard application instructions and just contact directly anyone they thought was the hiring manager.

Finally, and this is the strongest argument against anything like this: just the fact that you found someone on LinkedIn does not tell him/her anything useful about you. So, you found this hiring manager? That’s what LinkedIn is for; most people want to be found (but not necessarily contacted!) I think it would raise an eyebrow if an information professional *couldn’t* find someone on LinkedIn. Would the fact that you found the person indicate you would be a good match for the requirements of the job, or have the soft skills needed, or would be a good fit in the culture at that workplace? No. You would still be a stranger. It wouldn’t put you ahead of any other candidates, and might make you seem as if you are desperate or pushy or don’t know how things should be done or are unwilling/unable to follow directions.

When you find a position you are interested in, I would advise you to apply following the instructions carefully, customize your resume and really sell yourself in the cover letter for that specific job. If there is someone who knows you and your work well and knows the hiring manager well and would be willing to contact him or her and put in a good word for you, that
would be a much better way of making yourself stand out as a strong candidate for that job. That’s effective networking. Contacting a hiring manager yourself, out of the blue, is unlikely to get you a good result.

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Thank you and good luck!

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