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GETTING A LEG UP

I feel like opening a bottle of champagne, as March 2017 marks the anniversary of my first year with a major airline. Everyone eagerly anticipates his or her first airline anniversary—mostly because it comes with a nice pay bump—but also because it often means the end of your probationary period. An important milestone like this is both a time to enjoy a new pay rate (is it time for a new

car yet?) and also an opportunity for a quick self-assessment, to evaluate how the past year has gone, and to determine what your next steps should be. For years, my primary objective was to achieve the job that I now have. In accomplishing that goal, I have left an interesting space in my vision for the future.

Of course, my first thoughts go along with the raise—what do I need to do to help secure my family’s financial future? (I’m guessing it’s not a new car.) I should probably maximize retirement contributions before I get too comfy with an increased paycheck and make sure our six-month emergency fund is in place. My husband and I even chose to refinance our home. These are fairly straightforward things to accomplish, even if it may not be possible to do them all right away. Once they are done though, I still need to establish new priorities, or at least reorganize the old ones. Do I want to become more involved with my company? Perhaps volunteer for a committee, or invest time in a charitable organization? Is it time to pursue new interests?

As I considered those options, I could not help but feel a pang of guilt for friends and co-workers who are still where I was almost two years ago. They are trying hard to figure out what steps to take to get to the majors, and they are looking to those who went before them to give help, advice, and encouragement. As the anniversary date neared, I realized that before embarking on any other projects it might be time to make good on my offers to help them out.

There is a small window when you will be an attractive prospect as an effective reference. It is while your flying experience together is still fresh in your mind, and while your interview experience is still recent enough to be current. Airlines try to refine and update their interview process as both their needs and the pool of available applicants change, and it generally takes time to revise. Once the changes are made your own personal experience will be less useful to friends you are trying to help, so time really is of the essence.

Giving another pilot a leg up through the benefit of your own experience is not difficult, merely time-consuming. There is

generally a preset list of questions and requests that you will get when someone wants to pick your brain about how you were able to get the airline interview, and from there, how you got the job. They want to know what you did to make your application attractive, what prep you did for the interview, and they often would like for you to write them a personal letter of recommendation.

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Recommendation letters can be tricky. There are people for whom you spontaneously offered to write recommendations, and others who asked you. These are definitely not the same letter. It is a lot easier to write fluidly for someone you feel strongly about than just someone you happened to fly with. Plus, there is always the possibility that you

may agree to write a letter for someone whom you no longer remember well. If your memory of them is hazy but you are willing to write the letter, there is no harm in asking them to remind you of a trip that you had together to make the letter a bit more personal.

If you have a bunch of letters you have agreed to write, the temptation to cut and paste or use boilerplate is strong. Besides, you want to portray each person in a positive light, both personally and professionally, so how different can the letters really be? Pretty different actually! I was chagrined when one of my own letters of recommendation—written by a good friend—had the interesting distinction of using someone else’s name in the body of the letter. It was clear what had happened, but it was a tiny bit awkward to ask my friend to revise what he had done.

As time goes by, the requests for your help will diminish. Soon the pilots that you helped to get the job will be getting to their own one-year anniversaries and giving the people behind them a leg up in turn. As my own recommendation writing winds down, my time and attention can return to what projects and goals the future may hold—and when I can get a new car. →

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