

JOB SEARCH SKILLS FOR THE NEW ECONOMY

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I. INTRODUCTION

LAW students, this essay is intended to help you find your best possible fit in today's job market. The National Association of Law Placement reports that nationally only about 23% of law graduates find their first jobs through traditional fall on-campus interviews.¹ Thus, students need creativity, networking, outreach, and diligence to find a position. Further, recent economic dislocations in business, government, and law firms mean that today's job market presents additional challenges. Finding your best possible opportunity requires you to start planning your career early and then to design a strategy that will get you where you want to be. We hope that this essay will help. The strategies listed here apply to small law firms, large law firms, government and public service positions, and business.

II. OVERVIEW: TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR FUTURE

A. *Be Flexible*

Think early about geographic regions you will consider. The more flexible you are, the greater your opportunities.

The broader the range of specialties and practice areas you consider, the more opportunities you will have. Until you have tried something or talked to several people who practice in a certain area, you cannot know if you will like it.

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We thank the hundreds of our alumni and friends across the country who have shared with us their success stories and provided insights into the needs of employers in today's legal market. Among those who were particularly helpful are A. Louis Denton, Esq., Jeffrey K. Haidet, Esq., Christopher P. Bussert, Esq., Roger E. Murray, Esq., and the Hon. Louis J. Freeh. We also thank the editors of the University of Toledo Law Review for the improvements they contributed to this essay.

1. NAT'L ASS'N FOR LAW PLACEMENT, JOBS & JD'S: EMPLOYMENT AND SALARIES OF NEW LAW GRADUATES—CLASS OF 2007, at 100-01 (2008) (reporting that 22.6% of 2007 law graduates' jobs were obtained through the fall on-campus interviewing process). Most jobs, especially those in small law firms, government, and public interest, are obtained through "self-initiated" contacts, job postings, referrals, and other means. *Id.* Only in very large law firms are most jobs the result of on-campus interviews. *Id.*

For almost everyone, your first job will not be your last. Once you have a position as a lawyer, you can begin learning and building a base of skills and contacts that will give you leverage in future searches.

B. Take Charge, Be Nice, Be Positive

People hire people. All the résumés and fancy writings in the world will not be as effective as visiting a city or town and meeting people who can either recommend you or hire you. If you know you will visit an area on a break or vacation, contact people in advance and ask if you can drop by to meet them, either for an informational interview or to drop off your résumé. For smaller law offices or government departments, consider dropping off your résumé in person and asking if it is possible to speak to someone about opportunities. Every once in a while it will work, and if you are nice to the staff, you will at least have made a good impression on someone and shown more interest than those who only send mass e-mails and form letters.

People hire nice people. Be aware that every contact, whether with a receptionist or a partner, is an opportunity to be friendly and thoughtful and to make a good impression. This will make a difference.

People hire positive people. Whether in an informal telephone contact or an official interview, present your positive side. Think in advance about what you like about a region, a practice area, and your law school and what is positive about your preparation and background. Enthusiasm sells.

People are more inclined to interview people who are liked by people they like. Family friends, business contacts, those for whom you have worked, and people you meet at networking events all may know lawyers. Anyone in your network who can mention or recommend you will distinguish you from candidates without personal connections.

Talk to the people you meet. Ask lawyers what they do and why they do it. Ask for advice on how to break into specific areas. Professionals like to share their experiences and views.

C. Network

Use law school alumni resources to expand your network. Many alumni will be happy to give you advice on how to break into their regions and to discuss their specialties. If you meet with them, they may be able to recommend you to others. The opportunity to meet in-person with one or more of them is worth a trip to a region in which you want to practice law. Most will welcome your calls if you are polite and considerate of their time and schedules. Use your college alumni network as well. Contact business leaders and lawyers in your region of interest. They can be valuable references.

Attend law school career programs. Résumé and cover letter workshops, programs on specific careers, and programs on interviewing and networking skills will make you more effective. Take the opportunity to do mock interviews and schedule career counseling sessions at your law school.

Appreciate the advantages of networking and the credibility your new acquaintances can bring you. An employer is much more likely to read a letter that begins with “Ms. Sarah Wilson of Global Conglomerates suggested that I contact you to discuss” The letter should indicate when you will follow up with a phone call. This helps ensure your call will be well received.

III. UNDERSTAND THE PROFESSION

Join the ABA and a state bar association as a student member. Both will provide you access to resources, including magazines, that describe current issues in law practice. Read other bar journals, legal magazines, relevant blogs, and newspapers. These resources will help you make better career choices and be a more informed person when you interview. Attend CLE programs in practice areas of interest to be better informed and meet people. List this CLE participation on your résumé to demonstrate your diligence and sincere interest in a field.

Attend law school career presentations by lawyers in various specialties. There are interesting careers you have not yet considered.

Take advantage of faculty members who have sophisticated practice backgrounds. Find those who practiced in specialties or regions in which you are interested and ask them for advice. They will be happy to help.

Do volunteer legal work under the supervision of licensed attorneys, register for clinics and externships, and be willing to do unpaid work to learn about practice. Volunteer experiences will pay off in expanding your horizons and your network.

Part-time, paid legal work will give you marketable skills and good reference sources.

IV. MAKE A GOOD IMPRESSION

As you present yourself to employers, there are some things you can control and others you cannot. Make sure that you do your best on those things within your control 100% of the time. Treat every interaction, meeting, and e-mail as if it were part of an interview and always give your best effort. Make every contact count by taking the following steps.

A. *Be Professional*

Maintain a professional appearance in dress and grooming.

Be Punctual—In a law practice, time is money.

Proofread your résumé, cover letter, and writing sample. Have them reviewed.

Be certain that e-mail messages (as well as your e-mail addresses), voice-mail messages, and any other communications are professional in tone.

Ensure that you use a proper and respectful form of address, especially with judges and senior lawyers. Only use a person's first name at that person's instruction.

B. Work on Your Personal Skills

Posture—Get feedback on the messages your posture sends. Someone with good posture is often perceived as more confident and competent.

Body language—When you meet with someone in an office or a meeting, practice leaning forward in your chair to show interest and looking at them as they speak. That way, they will know that you are listening and interested.

Clarity of expression—Spend time getting honest feedback on how clearly you speak. Are you loud enough or too loud? Do you speak too quickly? Are your words pronounced clearly? These are things you can work on and practice. Improving them will make you more effective throughout your life.

The art of conversation—In an interview, if someone asks you a question, do not just answer and wait for the next question. Instead, answer with enthusiasm and then follow up with a related question that respects the interviewer's expertise. For example, you might answer a question about your practice interests like this: "Right now litigation looks interesting to me because of my clinic experience but there are a lot of other areas that look good too. How did you decide to practice real estate law?" This approach does not come naturally to many students. Practice on your friends. Look for ways to get their opinions and views on things. They will like it and the practice will make you more effective with interviewers, clients, and the world.

Dining habits—Compare your dining habits with those of people whose grace and professionalism you admire. Do you have habits that might be distracting or detract from the professional image you wish to send?

C. Make It Easy for Them

Use follow-up notes after meeting people, whether at networking events, informational interviews, or actual job interviews. In the note, find a way to refer to something that will remind them of the conversation and of you, such as, "I enjoyed our conversation about the Hawaiian real estate market."

Before you telephone someone, think about what you will say. Given the prevalence of voicemail, have a script prepared for your message so that you sound professional and organized. Respect the listener's time with a short, efficient message. Provide your name and number at the start and finish of your voicemail message. Speak slowly and clearly. It is very frustrating to try to return a telephone call when the speaker's voicemail message trailed off during the last two digits of a number or the speaker rattled off the number so quickly that it was incomprehensible. This happens often. Do not let it happen to you.

D. Learn about the Organization's Dynamics

Familiarize yourself with the organization's dynamics. Learn the appropriate "go to" people so you can be effective. Knowing who the hiring partner or hiring officer is and his or her staff member's names will help you succeed. Be aware that there may be expected systems, processes, and hierarchies, and that going around them often will not win you points. If you are not sure about a procedure or an expectation, ask. Although there may be times when you want or need to go outside channels, it will usually help to first try going through established systems.

V. AN INVENTORY OF CORE COMPETENCIES AND INTERESTS

Most lawyers look for a set of core competencies and interests in those they hire. Although each office and specialty will have different needs, all are looking for the following general attributes. This list is designed to help you conduct a self-inventory on your progress toward these competencies and interests and to help you demonstrate those you already have. As you do this evaluation, bear in mind that no one has all of these attributes. This list will help you select two or three to stress in interviews as part of your presentation. You should then plan to acquire those for which you do not yet have a record.

A. Education, Intellectual and Analytical Abilities & Research, Writing, and Communication Skills

A hiring lawyer needs to be confident in your ability to do the job. For your first job, grades will be relevant, more so in some practices than in others. As your career progresses, grades will become less relevant and will be outweighed by your accomplishments. If your grades are not strong, make sure you have other achievements to stress.

1. *Demonstrating Your Ability*

- Grades, especially in writing courses or core courses for a specialty you wish to pursue
- Law review, moot court, or trial team membership
- Solid writing sample relevant to the practice area you seek
- Entry in national law student writing competition
- Well-written cover letter and résumé

2. *Supplementing Your Record and Résumé*

- Participate in clinics, externships, and pro bono projects
- Find part-time legal work through which you can cultivate good references who are willing to attest to your ability
- Take CLE courses as a bar association student member
- Complete a certificate or specialty program

- Become certified in a specialized research database

B. Sincere Interest in the Firm, Practice Area, and Region

To distinguish yourself from the hundreds or more submitting résumés for a position, you must convince the hiring lawyer that your application is more than part of a national blanketing campaign. Use your cover letter to explain why you are particularly interested in the firm, practice area, and region. Find a way to prove your interest. If applying for a business-law position, for example, it may help to be a member or officer of a business law society. It will help even more if you mention the business-related law school courses and the finance or accounting courses you took in college. If you do not have a background, get one! If business law is the field of your choice, cross-register for a course at the business school or take a supplemental online course in a relevant business topic. It will show both your commitment and focus. If you would like to go to a particular region, try to become a student member of the relevant state or local bar association. Offer to visit an employer when you will be in town. Make sure to tell them if you will be taking the bar exam in that state. Within the law school, attend career programs for the specialties that interest you.

C. Potential for Client Service, Development, and Retention

A private law firm is a business in a competitive market. Your orientation to service and personal attention will help the firm retain clients. Your personality and networking through external activities will help the firm attract clients.

1. *Demonstrating Your Potential*

- Past employment that gave you contacts, business knowledge, and a reputation for good work
- A work record that demonstrates professional service attributes
- Engagement in your community, especially if you have had leadership roles in civic or charitable organizations

2. *Supplementing Your Record and Résumé*

- Involve yourself in and lead student organizations
- Meet people at bar functions and volunteer to help with bar projects
- Volunteer to help at law school alumni functions
- Do pro bono and paid work in which you develop a reputation for doing more than is necessary to serve the client
- Involve yourself in civic and charitable organizations through which you develop a reputation for being one of the “doers”
- If your prior work history gave you expertise, try to arrange a speaking engagement at an appropriate local business association

- Attend workshops on relevant skills. If you attended a networking workshop, consider listing it on your résumé. Attendance helps demonstrate that you care about things that are important to being an effective lawyer.

3. *Things to Think About*

Clients choose and stay with lawyers they like. They like people who are cheerful and positive. They hire people who, among other things, are responsive and keep their promises, return calls quickly, and look up things to protect the client even when not billing time. These are the kind of people who retain clients and get the type of reputation that attracts other clients. You are auditioning for this role in front of your classmates and faculty, all of whom may someday be in a position to refer business to you. Think about the kind of reputation you would like to have among them.

D. Work Ethic, Time Management, Teamwork, Commitment, and Responsibility

Think about times when you have been responsible for something and put in long hours to make it succeed. Think, too, about times you have worked well with a group and helped the group succeed. If you have an appropriate example, it can be powerful evidence of your suitability and you should be prepared to share it. Your example may come from your work history or your involvement in a charitable project or a student organization. If a good example does not immediately come to mind, think about doing something at law school in which you could make a difference. You could run an event for a student organization, help Law Career Services set up a job fair by calling potential participants, or be part of a legal services team working with lawyers in a pro bono program. *Find somewhere to get involved!* It will prove your suitability for a position and be good practice for a lifetime of making a difference.

As you get involved, be aware that a teamwork approach, rather than a solo act, will produce better experiences, references, and networks. These activities will help you make the friendships that will sustain you throughout your career.

VI. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Law school presents you with the unique opportunity to spend three to four years becoming the person and lawyer you want to be. Use those years well.