

Lawjobs.com Career Center

©2009 *Lawjobs.com* Career Center

Page printed from: [Lawjobs.com Career Center](#)

6 Tips for an Effective Job Search for Attorneys

Kate Neville
The National Law Journal
January 26, 2010

Lawyers at large law firms are typically smart, highly skilled individuals with much to offer potential employers. But they may have one distinct, if otherwise enviable, disadvantage in the job market: they may never have had to look for a job previously.

Going straight from law school to a firm through an on-campus recruiting program, or being recruited by a job placement professional for a lateral move, does not prepare attorneys to conduct a job search on their own. Those with prior work experience outside of a law firm have something of an advantage, but many have still not looked for a job in over a decade.

Here are six tips to help lawyers effectively find satisfying employment.

RECOGNIZE THE LIMITATIONS OF VARIOUS RESOURCES

A range of resources is available to lawyers looking for a job, but knowledgeable and objective information on making a transition can be difficult to find. It is important to be an informed consumer.

- Legal recruiters can be very knowledgeable about the legal market, and good ones will have a conversation with you about what they see in the market for people with similar backgrounds rather than only whether or not they have something for you at the moment. Their expertise, however, is limited to jobs that involve the traditional practice of law, with employers that can afford to pay a fee for their services, and available to candidates with very specific credentials.
- Executive recruiters are looking to fill jobs that former lawyers often excel at, but they typically won't talk to attorneys interested in making a change. Before lawyers make the transition to the business, operations, management

or marketing side on their own, these recruiters are not able to convince an employer to pay a fee for a candidate without specific job-related experience.

- Career guides can provide information on the range of paths attorneys pursue as well as self-assessment tools to help you identify your values, skills and interests. They often, however, leave it at that, providing little guidance on marketing yourself in other arenas and how, in fact, to move from Point A to Point B. In addition, many people often find it difficult to motivate by reading a book and need more personal interaction and answers to their specific questions.
- Career counselors or coaches vary broadly in the services they offer, their approach and their skill sets. Some have psychology degrees and are in fact therapists, some are "life coaches," and others specialize in career assessment tools and/or resume writing. Many lawyers complain about "touchy-feely" discussions, and others report they are treated as a widget on an assembly line without a thorough understanding of their background or the breadth of their skills.

As in many fields, it is important to find someone with whom you feel comfortable and who has the knowledge base and perspective that you in particular need. If you decide to work with a consultant, find someone who will tailor their services to each individual client and don't sign up for a long-term commitment. Every job candidate brings different things to the table, so one size does not fit all.

IDENTIFY WHAT TRADEOFFS YOU CAN ACCEPT

Rather than focusing exclusively on finding another law firm job or an in-house position (which prove to be even scarcer), it makes sense to think about the range of professional options you might have. To the extent you decide you want to maintain a certain lifestyle, you limit those options, so you need to know what your priorities are in advance.

Every job has its pros and cons -- predictability, money, leisure time, intellectual stimulation, social interaction, flexibility, etc. Decide what it is that you want in your professional life and what you want to avoid and use those criteria to guide your search.

In this market, often something has to give. It's helpful to think about what that might be. Perhaps a lifestyle adjustment, such as moving into a smaller house or a less expensive geographic area, would lessen your financial obligations and make a lower paying job a viable option. Consider also career alternatives such as a solo practice or independent consulting.

Identifying what characteristics are most important at this point in time -- and, importantly, what tradeoffs you are willing to accept -- helps you both target your search effectively. Doing so also helps you present yourself for

opportunities of interest convincingly -- you know why you're there and why you want the job.

ARTICULATE WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING FOR, EVEN IF YOU AREN'T SURE

Lawyers are trained to critique arguments and spot problematic issues rather than to develop something positive as an alternative. The biggest challenge for many is determining what it is they want to do. With limited experience in other professional settings and many having gone to law school because they weren't sure what else to do, lawyers often feel they don't have much on which to base their choice.

And they're right. It's extremely difficult to make a decision about what type of job you want in a vacuum.

The best way to get information on which to base your decision is to talk to smart people who actually do that work. In having these conversations, do not draw the person you are speaking with into your dilemma or discuss your uncertainty about what you want to do with your life. Depending on who you're talking to you can have different iterations of what you're interested in so long as you do some research, explain why it interests you and ask good questions to demonstrate you are a smart candidate who can anticipate issues that impact the field.

See it as a research exercise. Pick an area based on your criteria, do your research, figure out who to talk to, tailor your questions, and test your hypotheses using different iterations to get the information you need.

FIGURE OUT HOW TO HARNESS THE POWER OF NETWORKING

The beauty of networking is that you are both gathering information and getting your name out there at the same time. Though many people concentrate their job search efforts on submitting applications to postings found on the internet, it turns out that most jobs are never even posted. "Networking" is routinely identified as the most common way people get jobs -- particularly good and interesting jobs -- though many attorneys feel uncomfortable doing it.

The term means different things to different people, so when defined appropriately for a particular individual, he or she may even come to enjoy it. In addition to attending events with large groups of people you have never met and giving them your business card, meeting a former colleague for coffee, e-mailing an old college friend, or participating in a professional organization all fall under the umbrella of networking.

Since a friend of a friend's cousin can make the introduction that leads to your next job, follow these key steps:

- Determine who your contacts are, remembering that you never know who is in whose book club or who was whose college roommate.
- Follow professional protocol when approaching people, putting yourself in their position.
- Have your narrative ready about why you're looking and what you want.
- Ask good questions.
- Follow up appropriately.

TAILOR YOUR MATERIALS

While one would hope this point wouldn't need to be made, a number of lawyers simply revise the dates listed and send out the same resume they used to apply to their law firm and are then surprised not to get an interview. Once you understand what work is like in a particular area or market, you need to revise your resume and cover letter to demonstrate how you have the skills and experience employers are looking for and make you an excellent candidate.

Just because you have commanded a high hourly rate of compensation does not mean every other employer appreciates the value you can add. Make the argument for them.

FINALLY, TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF TO MAKE A POSITIVE IMPRESSION

Signs of extreme stress do not make someone an appealing candidate. Take advantage of having some time to exercise and sleep regularly. Surfing the web at 3 a.m. will not serve your professional interests as much as looking healthy, well-rested and confident in an informational interview the next day. Get some rest, and good luck with your job search.

Kate Neville, Esq., is based in Washington, D.C., and has a national career consulting practice specifically for attorneys. More information about her services can be found at www.nevillecareerconsulting.com.