



GET THE JOB OFFER!

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My last article in The Pennsylvania Bar News, “Conducting a More Successful Interview”, got a strong response. Lots of requests for follow-up materials. Surprisingly, quite a few members wrote and requested that I do an article about how to be more successful when sitting on the other side of the table as a job applicant. Thanks for the great suggestion.

Like so many skills required of attorneys, being a successful applicant requires skills which, I am happy to report, can be learned. And I am happy to share my thoughts on what you can do to present yourself as capably as possible. But let me not get ahead of myself. In order to ace the interview, you have to first get one. This first hurdle is difficult for most.

Given our still-tight economy, there is a lot of competition for the positions you will seek. Your first task is to get past the gatekeeper who is reviewing and filtering applicants; passing through just a few for further consideration. This is the point where using an outside expert is most beneficial: getting your resume and the bones of your cover letter professionally done. If it doesn't capture interest within 30 – 45 seconds, you're done!

Everything you send should be of the highest quality. Emails and cover letters should be carefully worded. Use proper punctuation and spell check. Proofread. Double check for attachments before hitting SEND. Don't be overly casual or personal. Use high grade bond paper for printed items. Be sure the print quality is good.

I recall my review of the resume of a COO. In the section where he described his particular attention to detail as a great asset, it was immediately contradicted by the title of the next section which read “Accomplishments.” In the rejection letter I gently suggested he spell check his resume. Unbelievably, he wrote back and asked me for a “hint” as to what error existed.

Do your research. Put in the hard work. Your ability to effectively perform strategic research in order to target and pursue opportunities may be the ultimate determinant of whether or not you find suitable employment. Likewise, your dogged persistence in pursuing all possibilities will factor into your likelihood of success.

Remember that successfully finding employment is often a numbers game based on persistence. The more people you contact, the more people you can be put in contact with, and eventually you wind up in the right place at the right time. The trick is to stay focused while increasing the numbers contacted within your designated target zone.

One additional point is to always use the name of the referrer, if there is one, in order to open the door of the new contact. “Hi, my name is [your name], and [insert name of person who referred you] suggested I give you a call because he felt you might be able to assist me. The reason I’m calling is that I’m researching firms which might be suitable matches for my qualifications and interest. Would you be able to talk to me for just a couple of minutes now? If not, I can call back at a more convenient time.” If the person called has nothing to offer, then ask him or her to suggest to you another person or two who might help. Be sure to be gracious and thankful, even for one name, and if you get more than a couple, a well-written personal thank-you can often yield unexpected results, especially later in your career.

Now let’s talk about the interview itself. Too many applicants take a cavalier approach and are not properly prepared. Think of the interview process as one or more tests you must pass. You understand about preparing for a test.

First, anticipate the questions you will be asked. Be prepared to answer them. Google can assist you in locating the most common questions to anticipate.

Next, make a list of your greatest strengths and weaknesses. Be prepared with short vignettes to illustrate strengths. Prepare to discuss weaknesses directly by short detail of what you learned, how you cope with those issues to minimize them, or discuss the balancing effects a weakness offers. For example, a typical weakness for an attorney is a need for perfection. Counterbalancing that might include developing an increased ability to recognize when remaining benefits of overworking something might exceed value to the client. Now your self-professed (and common) weakness becomes an illustration of how savvy you are about understanding value from the client’s perspective.

Arrive early. Overdress. I usually suggest adding something to the wardrobe which is interesting and a talking point to get things started. For women it’s often a broach or bold color. For men an unusual pocket square or tie, or in one interview I’ll never forget, a set of cowboy boots accompanied by a great story!

Do your homework. Make sure you check the website of the firm thoroughly. If the position is in certain practice area(s) check the bios of anyone at the firm



doing that work, from most senior partner to youngest associate. You will find patterns, hopefully. For example, suppose you see that majority of attorneys in the practice area(s) went to the same law school. That's a more common occurrence than you might think. Find and memorize any who are exceptions. If they are part of the interview process, when it's your turn to ask questions, ask how they penetrated the invisible wall for people who didn't go to the desired law school. Your attention to detail will be remembered, as will your sense of humor. They will be impressed that you understand that there are cultural biases which are natural, and that you know it's important to be able to fit it.

Be prepared to ask or comment about particular clients highlighted, firm accomplishments, mission statement, whatever you can glean from the website that shows you pay attention, and that you're both prepared and "in tune" with the firm.

If you're subjected to a high pressure group interview, know that all they want to see is how well you hold up. If 5 people are asking questions simultaneously, focus on answering each one at a time, but keep your answers brief and offer to elaborate further at the end. Never let them see you sweat or show you are rattled. Keep your poker face. Monitor your body movements and tone of voice.

Follow-up is critical. As soon as the interview ends, make sure you have a list of each person you interviewed with, and if there were any memorable conversations make note of what and with whom. Send thank you letters generously. Follow up with expressions of continued interest with the top person in the process, but only if you are genuinely interested. There's a blurry line between conscientious follow-up and being a pest. I wish I could provide clear guidelines, but each situation defines itself as you go. So don't hesitate to ask when it would be reasonable to follow-up again.

Yes, there's a lot of serendipity when it comes to getting that next job. It requires research, diligence, and preparation on your part. These are all skills you can improve if you want to. If you're a PBA member don't hesitate to reach out and schedule a time to talk further about an upcoming job search.

A version of this article originally appeared in the February 19, 2018 issue of the Pennsylvania Bar News.

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