

California Law Business

the adviser

ATTORNEY PLACEMENT

By Sanford Lechtick

HOW TO INTERVIEW

Just because an attorney went to a prestigious law school doesn't mean that he or she will be hired.

A surprisingly high number of attorneys would flunk Basic Interviewing 101. People assume that since attorneys are well educated, smart and articulate, most are effective communicators. In a career context, they should be excellent interviewees. The truth is that it's not just rookies but many experienced lawyers who are lacking in interview fundamentals – and not all are smart, articulate or well educated.

Two myths relate to pedigree and book of business. Many partners who are thinking of moving their practice erroneously assume that if they have a healthy book, the interview process is a mere formality. Many don't completely understand that the best fits are 2+2=5 scenarios and they must be able to articulate why they wish to move, why they wish to move to that particular firm and why the deal makes sense to everybody. No longer are firms bringing in partners with healthy books just for the sake of added business. More and more firms, especially the better managed firms are looking at partners who fit long-term strategy with cross-selling potential. Many highly credentialed associates, especially those who have done well at top law schools think that about the only thing that they can do to flub the interview process is pick their nose. They reason that basic economics of supply and demand dictate their marketability and value. While the preceding is true, I have seen top associates from Harvard, Columbia and Yale mess up interviews that should have been slam-dunks. In addition, I can recite numerous instances where rainmakers with \$2M+ books of business were blown out because of their presentation.

Effective interviewing is actually an art and can significantly increase an attorney's job options. Certainly, books of business, judge clerkships, Coif and Law Review Honors from top schools help significantly. But, consider that in this increasingly competitive environment, there are many highly credentialed lawyers with great resumes or books vying for the same position in both the in-house sector and at law firms. In fact, for every in-house opening, there are between 50 and 100 resumes submitted and at least a dozen who interview. And as far as law firms, especially those that are considered sexy, growing and first rate, the resume submissions from headhunters alone easily number 20-30 per position. What then is it that separates the wheat from the chafe? Style or substance? Increasingly, it is both.

Few lawyers are, by their nature or training natural salesmen. Most assume that in applying for a position or moving their practice, they are either qualified or not. Cream rises to the top, they believe, and if they are the cream, which many think they are, they will get the job. In some cases this is true, but since hiring is an imperfect art, and no one really knows who is best, the issue is one of *perception*. Therefore, successful interviewing is enhancing how you are perceived.

Decision makers attempt to evaluate your skill sets, expertise and track record. But equally important, they try to determine how well you will fit in, how compatible you are with the firm's philosophy, work ethic, growth objectives and personality. A firm's collective personality reflected by the firm's decision makers cannot be understated in importance. I cannot tell you how many terrifically qualified attorneys have been rejected because they didn't understand the culture of the firm and either came on too strong or not strong enough. Some were rejected because they were perceived to be wimpy and lacking fire in their gut. Others were tagged by being too cocky, or too wrapped up in themselves. And yet others focused on the wrong things or were perceived too slick, too much the salesman. It's amazing that the same person can be perceived so differently by different firms. Obviously a key part of my job is preparing the candidate as well as the decision makers to focus on the right stuff and do it in the right way. No matter how qualified an attorney is, decision makers ask questions like, "If he can't sell himself to us, how can he sell himself to clients?" or "If he hasn't taken the time to understand who we are, why should we take time to find out who he is?" On occasion, a decision maker says to me, "His resume looks great, he's a nice guy, but I'm not sure if he'd fit in".

I hate saying this, but sometimes interviewers don't completely understand what they want. Sometimes they can't describe exactly what they need, but they definitely recognize what they're not looking for. Lawyers, being risk averse, often times find it easier to focus on negatives than positives. And it is not necessarily the law school, grades, work experience or book. Sometimes it comes to the "X" factor called chemistry. In short, more than people realize, much of screening and ultimately hiring is done from the gut – subjective, touchy-feely emotion and prejudice.

Pre-interview

It's been said that trials are won not in the courtrooms but in the preparation. This is also true in the interview. Many interviewees are like half-baked potatoes. One bite and the interviewer knows the candidate is not prepared. Why are you there? Why are you interested in that particular organization? Have you researched their history? What is their primary business? Key clients? Important transactions? Partners in the news! Backgrounds of the founders? Who are their competitors? What distinguishes them from others on the same line of work? Rapport building is essential. Knowing as much as possible about the firm, its values, attitudes, philosophy and needs significantly helps in establishing the connection to decision makers. Many companies have websites for instance where you can learn a lot – about people, products, profits and history. Information is power. On the other hand, if lawyers did a little homework before hand, they might conclude that the fit was not the best. Unfortunately, some headhunters focus

so hard on getting the “send-out”, they invariably squeeze square pegs into round holes and end up wasting everyone’s time.

The Interview

The best interviews are two-way streets – a mutual flow of information. On one hand, the interviewer is attempting to establish what separates the candidate from others in the pack, how he will fit in, whether his aptitudes, track record, attitude and experience make him the most qualified for the position. More than many decision-makers would like to admit, it often it comes down to personality, presentation, appearance, demeanor and perception of potential to build a practice, work hard or solve problems. Human traits like likeability, confidence and enthusiasm cannot be discounted in the selection process. The one trait that is as important as anything else is common sense – and it has nothing to do with G.P.A.

The candidate needs to learn about the firm – what makes them tick, what do they value most, how well they will be able to learn, be mentored or expand their practice. You obviously want to make certain points and tie specific accomplishments which directly applies to the position. Yet, a critical part of the interview is to learn more about the firm and their needs, which means asking questions and listening. I am flabbergasted that many candidates are so busy talking and trying to impress, that they miss key points and emphasize things which are not really relevant to the position. Smart lawyers like any good marketer, bait the hook to suit the fish. They pick up on subtle but significant points and alter their presentation, if necessary. Sometimes discussions focus on personal things, where the decision maker ends up talking about his “hot buttons”. Noticing objects in ones office and talking about the golf trophies or unusual artifacts on the wall or his kid’s All Star Little League exploits helps establish rapport and likeability.

If you are interested, let them know. I have never met a decision maker who was turned off by enthusiasm. Some lawyers are too coy, show no emotion and would probably make great poker players – but do not do well in the interview. Find out where things stand, what’s the next step? Are there any areas in your background or experiences they see as problematic? It’s always better to hit problems head on such as too many jobs, not enough experience or prison sentences.

Post-interview

Decision makers are usually exceedingly busy. Unless the candidate completely knocked their socks off, the process often moves slowly. Days turn into weeks and sometimes months. While some people disagree, I think a candidate, after a few days should follow-up and find out where things stand. If a headhunter is involved, the recruiter should quickly learn and address problems or questions. While some lawyers think it pushy to follow-up, gets a pro-active stance is productive. I have seen many instances where one candidate got the job offer, not because he was more qualified but was perceived to have more initiative, go-getter tenacity and overall interest in the firm.

In short, experience, credentials, track record and books of business are important. However, thorough preparation and research will enhance your ability to connect, which will in turn help you make a more effective presentation. To paraphrase John F.

Kennedy, “Ask not what the firm can do for you, but what you can do for them”. The more compelling your presentation is, and what you bring to the table helps put you in the driver’s seat. After you sink the hook, then you can ask for the world. When they know you’re being pursued by one of their competitors, that heightens your desirability. Probing questions and vigorous listening will increase your ability to tie your strengths to the position, or help you decide that they’re not for you. In short, great academics and/or solid books of business are important. Yet, based on more than 25 years in the search business, I have seen dozens and dozens of cases where less qualified candidates won out over others who had better resumes, bigger books and nicer smiles. In this age of increased competition and mobility, effective interviewing techniques will increase your options and help give you the edge in tight races.

Sandford A. Lechtick is president of Esquire Legal Search Consultants, an Los Angeles-based attorney placement organization. He specializes in mergers, acquisitions and partner placement.

October 16, 2000