



ATTORNEY SEARCH

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Bikinis or Briefs...What Lies Beneath the Perfect Summer Interview

Welcome to the summer season. It's July, it's hot, our minds are turned away from our computers and brief-writing and toward the beach (and those new Malia Mills bikinis tucked into our drawers since spring). Summer sneaks up on all of us, and when it does, it begs the question "Is now a good time to look for a new job?"

This question is usually followed by one of the following follow-up questions (depending on your personality): (1) "When I meet with potential interviewers, will my tan belie the fact that I've been working hard?" or (2) "Will working hard on interviews this summer interfere with my tanning time?" It is likely that if you relate more closely with question number two above, you are not quite ready to spend your summer job hunting. Embrace that fact, and go back to the beach. In contrast, if question number one is more in line with your thinking, this article will provide you with some useful tips for interviewing during the summer months and how to score yourself a fabulous new associate position by Labor Day.

The first rule of thumb for achieving success on the summer job hunt is casually hinted at in the paragraph above. More succinctly, it is:

"Know your priorities. If the beach and your bikini (or trunks) are calling, answer the call. If your career is calling, dump the bikini in favor of a good brief (writing)—and get back to your job hunt."

In the world of legal recruiting, the "summer season" is considered the second week of May through the second week of August. That's eight short weeks. Traditionally, such season is very, very slow. Why is it so slow? Firms are focused on their summer associate classes, who start as early as May and leave as late as August or September. With firms' focus turned toward tending to their summer groups, lateral hiring often becomes second priority simply because there are not enough hours in the day for firm recruiting departments to attend to everything. As a result, lateral hiring (job openings available and response time from firms) slows down.

This is a natural course which occurs every year. In fact, I usually never advise candidates to look for new jobs during the summer months because it is such a slow period. Having said this, the summer of 2007 has started off a bit differently. Job openings available to associates in certain practices have continued to stream in on a consistent basis...as opposed to slowing down.

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Of course, the “process,” itself, has slowed down (again, because the recruiting departments at the firms must put their summer associates’ needs first during this period and often attend to lateral hiring in the odd hours). Still, the fact that jobs continue to stream in has been a big indicator for me that maybe—just maybe—the summer of 2007 might be the first summer season in a long time where associates (if they are so inclined) could get an edge on their competition by putting themselves on the market when everyone else is putting on Coppertone—and achieve their career goals well before September comes calling.

Whether you decide to pursue a new position during the summer or wait until the fall months, certain truths hold fast. Junior associates, and very often midlevel or senior associates who have been at the same firm all of their professional lives, make the same common interview mistakes. As I have seen such mistakes come into play more frequently lately, I felt it important to address them below:

Know Your Motivation (Seasonally and Personally).

We addressed seasonal motivation above. Personal motivation is a beast of a very different species. Personal motivation means *know yourself*. Know when you are truly ready to make a move, and go for it. Don’t dabble.

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When candidates dabble in the marketplace, what they inevitably end up achieving is obtaining one or two offers...followed by immediate personal confusion because they do not know what to do about those offers since they have been “dabbling” and haven’t really explored all the firms they wanted to explore. So they either take one of those offers (*without* undertaking the full-out market exploration they really wanted for themselves) or they reject those offers because “they came in too early in the process.” Either way, you lose. So don’t dabble. Sit down with yourself and think about (1) whether you really want to move; (2) if so, when you want to move by; (3) what areas of practice and law firms really entice you; and (4) whether you will commit yourself 110% to the process.

These are the four legs of a perfect table. The end result of such thought will be a full-on market exploration, a nice reception of offers from a range of firms, and a well-thought-out decision where you either take one offer or stay put. Either way, you win. Remember: a well-thought-out and committed-to interview process does not mean that you have to take the job. It does, however, mean that you are giving yourself the absolute best platform upon which to stand when determining whether a new job is right for you. That’s the platform you want—one with all four legs of equal strength.

Again and again, however, I see candidates venturing into the job market without considering any of the above. In fact, as mentioned earlier, my most risk-averse candidates are junior candidates who have not interviewed since law school or midlevel to senior candidates who have been at the same firm since graduating from law school. It is toward these candidates, in particular, that I direct this article. Upon building your perfect table, remember the next basic truth:

Interviewing is an Art Form.

Commit to learning the art form, and you will succeed. In fact, why don’t you spray paint that basic tenet across the top of your four-legged table so it can’t wash off. If you can commit yourself to this foremost truth, you are steps ahead of your competition.

Consistently, I see junior candidates who have not interviewed since law school conduct their first lateral interviews the same way they conducted on-campus interviewing—with utter failure as a result. Very often what “worked” for you during law school will not work for you anymore as a lateral candidate. Likewise, I

consistently see midlevel and senior candidates, especially those who have been at the same firms all their professional lives, enter into lateral interviewing as if they were stopping for coffee and chatting with the barista. Again, that won't work for lateral interviewing. You need to bring much, much more to your table.

Art-Form Rule Number One: Know Thyself First and Thy Interviewer Second.

First, remember that if you are a junior associate who has not interviewed since law school, it is very likely that your law school interviewing was for on-campus interviews. On-campus interviews are directed toward summer jobs where firms are hiring anywhere from between 60 and 100 summer associates. As such, you can imagine that the points you need to hit during on-campus interviewing are much less "set in stone" than they are for lateral hiring post law school where there is only ONE opening and 300 candidates for that one opening. You cannot rely on personal interests and knowing your interviewer's bio to score you points. Instead, you need to know your OWN bio, your own deal sheet, your own deal value, and your own practice highs and lows like the back of your hand. In short, for lateral interviewing, it's all about you. If you don't know "you" and your own resume in fluid, intelligent terms, you are starting off behind the eight ball.

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Similarly, midlevel and senior candidates cannot rely on the fact that you have been at your firm for five to eight years post law school as your sole selling point. Yes, it is a selling point, but you also need to bring energy, enthusiasm for a new firm home, adaptability, and talent to your table. As much as it is wonderful that you have been at your current firm forever, such reality also begs the question "Is this person really interested in making a move, and are they adaptable to change, or are they a risk-averse personality?"

Likewise, midlevel and senior candidates cannot solely rely on the fact that they "have the exact experience" as their only selling point. Associates with on-point experience are common. Congratulations, you are now one among 100—so you have lessened the competition by 200. Is that really going to get you the job? No. You have to not only have on-point experience but also the ability to discuss that experience base in clear, coherent terms which make it immediately transferable to the work at your potential new firm.

Be detailed. Detailed candidates naturally exude enthusiasm for their practice, and enthusiasm is contagious. It's simple, really. Have you ever had someone describe an experience to you, such as parachuting from an airplane, in such detail that you could almost see the clouds for yourself? Feel the air brushing past you? Experience the jolt of the chute opening? Didn't that get you excited (or at least terrified)? That's the candidate you want to be before your interviewer...someone whose detailed description of their work renders them fascinating as compared to other candidates.

Art-Form Rule Number Two: Bring Detail to Thy Resume.

The second biggest mistake interviewees make is revising their resumes in such a manner that they summarize, paraphrase, or shorten them to one page in such an egregious fashion that they are no longer flattering. I am consistently awed by candidates who verbally provide me with wonderful details about their firm experience and then send me a resume which is cursory at best.

Of course, the two lines of thought behind such resume style are (1) "I will inform the interviewer of the details when I get before them in person" and (2) "I needed to keep it to one page." The second line of thought is dead. Please erase that rule from your memory. The first line of thought is ridiculous. You will never get in front of an interviewer to explain your value if your resume doesn't get you the interview!

Hence, bring words to your resume. Don't be lazy; don't presume you are getting an interview and can talk about it then or that "the firm will know what I've been doing because my practice group is well known." A resume should tell the reviewer, in three seconds, the most important things about you. If you look at your resume and cannot see, in three seconds, why you are better than the next person, get back to work. The resume is the single most important thing you will ever draft in your life—EVER—(next to your Last Will and Testament).

Draft your resume like a lawyer. Be verbal; include representative deal sheets, honors, achievements, committees, representative cases, and anything else that will set you apart from the pack. Pretend this is a brief-writing competition, and write like it matters. Remember the old Irish adage “Love like you’ve never been hurt. Dance as if no one is watching”? Well, draft your resume as if the managing partner of your firm assigned you such task, and draft as if everyone is watching.

Art-Form Rule Number Three: Thou Shalt Not Down Talk.

The biggest interviewing mistake made by 80% of all candidates is “down talking.” Down talking is the practice of “pulling back” during an interview whereby candidates fail to really put themselves out there with confidence—even arrogance.

The majority of people “down talk” so as not to seem egotistical. Others down talk so as not to cause interviewers to think that they know too much...for fear that when they get to the firm, they will be put to the test and will not be able to put out. Others down talk when they have entered the interview process too soon and, as such, sabotage their own efforts by not really trying. Finally, on that same note, a fourth line of candidates down talk when they really do not want to add another offer to the mix for fear of having to make too many decisions on too many offers.

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Who wouldn’t want many offers? You would be surprised how many attorneys run from multiple offers because multiple offers put the onus on them to make multiple decisions. In fact, this final line of thought is very common. Attorneys can be very risk averse and run from change for fear of having to make a tough decision. Does this surprise you? Well, for some, it is not that surprising. An attorney’s life follows a very certain course: undergrad, LSAT, 1L year and journal writing, 2L year and on-campus interviewing, 3L year and graduation, and then firm life. Hence, when the job hunt begins, for many people, it is the first time in years that they have had to make a decision which wasn’t set up for them according to some natural course or expectation. This realization is both freeing and terrifying.

As a result of the above factors, many candidates down talk and subconsciously pull back during their interviews. They fail to put themselves out there, relying on their resumes, general good natures, and crossed fingers to get them jobs. They won’t.

So what is the opposite of down talking? Certainty and confidence. This is not to be confused with cockiness. Think of the person in your life who served as your best tutor or trainer (in the field of dance, sports, academics, you name it!). That person likely had a combination of confidence, likeability, proven experience, and whimsical arrogance tempered by humility. Be that person. It’s an attractive personality which instills confidence and trust and inspires others—it also gets you the offer.

Art-Form Rule Number Four: State Thy Case.

At the end of the day, the fourth biggest mistake candidates make is leaving the interview without letting the head of recruiting or the lead hiring partner know that you are interested in the firm and the position at hand. Let’s be honest. Sometimes you do not know if you are interested until you get home and really sit with the events of the day—marinating them in your mind. If you walk out of that interview, however, and fail to state your case, you have lost something that someone else will gain.

Unless a position is so disturbing to you that you absolutely know you will never accept the offer if one is extended, you should always close your interviewing day with a distinct showing of committed interest. Again, interviewing is like dating. I say this again and again. If you end a dinner date or drink date without some indication of interest or inference of “getting in touch” for the weekend, you leave the other person thinking “What just happened here?” Would you ever leave a date by saying “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me” and then staring at the other person blankly? I doubt it. So don’t do that in your professional life either.

I have the advantage of seeing both sides of the coin as firms will very often ring me and say, "He/She was very impressive, but we couldn't tell if he/she was really interested." The type of candidate described above has played a good game but likely has not hit the ball out of the park. Thus, if you like a firm, tell them. If you don't do it during the interview, go home and write a thank-you note that evening (not the next week), and tell them. Be frank. Be honest. Be clear. Firms, just like candidates, appreciate clarity. As your mother always told you, when you leave the table, excuse yourself. Don't just walk away.

Now...GET BACK TO THE BEACH!!!

While focusing on the summer months, the above tools are applicable in all four seasons. For those who take advantage of summer 2007 to look for jobs, the above hints will make you stand out from the crowd. For those who take advantage of these hints to look for jobs in the fall, you can trust that they are as fade-proof and shrink-resistant as your best summer swimsuit.