



ATTORNEY SEARCH

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When Good Candidates Go Bad: A Tale of Trust

I am disgruntled, disturbed, disenchanted. No, actually, I am deeply concerned. The cause? Well, that's the subject of this article. For the past nine months, I have watched some of my flawless, brilliant candidates with bright futures engage in very destructive behavior and/or antics during their interview process. I have encountered a strange phenomenon whereby a good candidate ("Victor Victorious") goes unequivocally bad ("Vlad the Impaler"). I am not talking about "past your prime" type of bad. I am speaking of the situation whereby a candidate goes from top pick to COMPLETELY out of the race in less than 24 hours due to behavior undertaken by the candidate himself/herself during the interview process.

Examples of such behavior may include the following:

- Informing the interviewer that although the New York office is delightful (and you are interviewing for a New York opening), you have a "keen interest in Atlanta"; hence, you would really like to learn if the position is transferable.
- Informing a Managing Partner, before you have met him/her, that although you would very much like to meet with his/her firm, you will only do so if "immediate partnership is on the table." By the way, you do not have portables.
- Failing to adequately prepare for an interview to such an extent that you actually respond, "I don't know how to answer that question; I have no response, and I'm not going to try."
- Informing the interviewer that your main goal is to "just get out" of your current firm. Actually, that is your response to 5 out of the 10 questions posed.
- Submitting yourself to several firms, garnering an impressive number of interviews, and then withdrawing from all firms "just because," with that being the ONLY reason given to each and every firm.

Believe it or not--the above situations are all true. These are not fiction. Further, such actions taken and/or statements made were not made and/or taken by young, naïve candidates, but by flawless, experienced, highly educated candidates from top U.S. firms. With the exception of the last example (who withdrew early), all of the above candidates were front-runners; all lost the job based upon their above-referenced actions. ALL were disappointed. One cried.

Upon writing this article, I spent several days going back through my diary, thinking about my candidates who failed in the above ways and trying to find a common thread. I was searching for some personality trait (ego? sense of entitlement?) that would cause a stellar candidate to go from flawless to hopeless in less than 24 hours. I realized that such fault may not lie entirely with the candidate; it may lie in the relationship between recruiter and candidate--a relationship that, when not based on trust, may cause a candidate to disregard career advice and pursue a course of action during the interview process that goes against the grain, goes against logic, and certainly flies in the face of him/her getting the job. This is a tale of trust. T -- R -- U -- S -- T.

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**When Good Candidates Go Bad:
A Tale of Trust**

T is for the time it will take you to get to know your recruiter and choose the right one for you. Because I am a recruiter with BCG Attorney Search, I am inclined to believe we are the best--ethically and professionally. That said, working with a recruiter is, in many ways, akin to hiring a therapist or a lawyer. The basis of any successful relationship is trust, and trust takes time. When trust is lacking, the relationship, and any undertaking pursued by such relationship, will fail.

Many candidates contact one placement firm and work with the first recruiter they encounter. They think that they are saving themselves time, but they are doing themselves a disservice. The candidates with whom I love to work are those candidates who have read my bio, those candidates who are aware of the reputation of BCG Attorney Search in the industry, those candidates who have already spoken to four other recruiters and "can't seem to find a right match." These are the candidates I love, because they are taking the process seriously. They are looking for a recruiter who will serve as their advisor; career counselor; and, at the end of the day, their friend. While you may not approach your hunt for a recruiter in such a way, you would be wise to do so because, at the end of the day, that recruiter will know more about you than your husband or your wife does. You may not believe that, but it is often true.

Those relationships that have been successful in the end (namely, my candidate has found his/her best position) have been the ones where I know my candidates' likes/dislikes, hopes/fears, goals for the future, mistakes of the past. I usually know what their home lives are like, what they miss about their past, and where they see themselves in 10 years. In short, I come to KNOW them. Such knowledge is the byproduct of honest conversation, and honest conversation takes effort. Honest conversation also builds trust. When trust is built and fortified, an unbeatable bond is developed, whereby I am free to take all of my knowledge of the legal recruiting industry and legal marketplace and pass that on to my candidate. I take all of my knowledge of successful interviewing skills and teach my candidates how to present well. I use all my talents as a former big-firm lawyer and current top recruiter to teach, mold, assist, and guide. Because of trust, the candidate absorbs and learns and, in the end, achieves success.

When trust does not exist, candidates will discount my guidance. They will usually inadequately prepare for an interview, ask inappropriate questions, tell inappropriate stories, make inconceivable demands, and often ruin a wonderful opportunity for themselves. When I tell a candidate, "Don't ask that question now; let's save it for later," and I find out from the firm (as I always do) that said candidate asked that question anyway, I know that trust does not exist. I know that the candidate sees me not as a friend or guide, but as a stepping-stone. When candidates do not trust me enough to use my knowledge and experience as support to strengthen their job searches and achieve their career goals, they have done themselves a disservice. The question is this: How can I teach candidates to trust when that is not something that comes naturally?

R is for relationship. For some, trust comes easily as part and parcel of any relationship. For others, it does not. For those people, the focus must first be on the relationship and defining what that relationship is.

The relationship between recruiter and candidate is either (i) teacher and student (a somewhat more emotional approach) or (ii) information giver and receiver (a somewhat more businesslike approach). I favor the former, and you should as well. If you do not see your recruiter as someone who can teach you about the marketplace and someone from whom you wish to learn, choose another recruiter.

Many candidates seek out recruiters, but then attempt to structure the relationships as business arrangements whereby they occasionally consult with their recruiters, invariably attempting to conduct their job searches as they alone see best. This is completely illogical. Such is the equivalent of a client hiring a litigator and then deciding that he/she wants to litigate the case pro se. We have all heard the saying "The defendant who pleads his own case has a fool for a client." It is the same theory during a job search.

The recruiter/candidate relationships that are successful are those in which a candidate sees his/her recruiter as a career guide and confidante and understands that he/she has essentially called upon an expert to help him/her navigate the waters of the legal marketplace. Once you have determined to enter a job search, take the time to hire the right recruiter. If trust does not come easily for you, speak to your recruiter about defining your relationship. What are the expectations on either side? Once you come to a definition that satisfies both sides, learn to trust that choice. Learn to trust that relationship.

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U is for understanding the marketplace. More precisely, I call this "strategery." (Actually, *Saturday Night Live* coined such phrase in reference to the malapropisms of President George W. Bush; however, I like to use it freely in my work.) "Strategery" is the process whereby a recruiter comes to teach his/her candidate (i) about the legal marketplace, (ii) his/her value therein, and (iii) the best way to achieve his/her career goals (with each firm as a separate entity addressed therein).

An example of "strategery" is this: Many candidates want to discuss vacation time or pro bono work; depending upon the firm, these two questions are largely better left post-offer. Likewise, many candidates want to discuss partnership opportunities at the first screening interview. Again, depending upon the firm, such question is usually better left to completion of the partner and senior associate interviews and prior to the junior associate dialogue. In other words, there is a time and a place for everything--and every firm plays by VERY different rules. Trust your recruiter and your established relationship to guide you as to how, when, and in what fashion to approach each firm. Trust your recruiter to structure your approach to each firm, to define the "strategery."

Earlier in this article, I mentioned a candidate who wanted to know about partnership BEFORE going in for the first round. Even though I advised him to avoid such question in the initial round, he still decided to pursue his own course. That was the end of the road. The interviewing partners thought my candidate was--kindly put--insane. My candidate wondered what he did wrong (as he was "just being honest"). What he did wrong was discount "strategery" and discount the advice of an expert in the profession (me). He failed to realize that job hunting is very much like deal making. It involves timing, careful negotiations, deliberate conversations, and patience. And it involves trust between recruiter and candidate. When a candidate lacks trust, he/she pursues his/her own course of action, often with dire consequences.

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S is for stamina. Last year, I met a wonderful candidate--bright, personable, and experienced. Again, her resume was flawless. She wouldn't let me rework a thing--no formatting changes, no word changes, no extra bolding, no deal sheet. In effect, she had hired me to assist her in her job search; yet she needed to retain control--total control. After 10 months, she had gotten nowhere. She had obtained one interview and one corresponding rejection.

Exasperated, she came to me. I informed her (again) that our future success was dependent upon teamwork. I informed her that I needed her to "help me to help her." This time, she listened, and for the first time, we sat down together as a team. She agreed to trust. In particular, she agreed to let me assist her in re-drafting her resume. She also created a deal sheet for me. She trusted my judgment as to those firms where she would be successful and find happiness. Two weeks later, she had two interviews. Again, we sat down together and engaged in a mock interview. We reworked thoughts and concepts and goals. We spoke ad nauseam over the phone. Three weeks later, she had garnered two offers, with a third on the way.

This is not a testament to me; it is a testament to us, working together as a team. It is a testament to trust. While the above relationship ultimately resulted in a very quick turnaround success, stamina is often required throughout the course of the relationship to maintain confidence. You need to maintain confidence in your recruiter; your recruiter needs to maintain confidence in you; and together, you both need to have the stamina to maintain confidence in your pairing.

Trust in a defined Relationship structured by Strategery and fortified by Stamina yields success. Success begets a Thank You--a thank you from you to your recruiter, and vice versa.

T is for thank you. A thank you also goes to the candidates whose stories I referenced at the beginning of this article. I have spent many a subway ride staring out into the cold, dark subway tunnels, thinking about ways I might have been able to stop such candidates from hurting themselves and crippling their job searches. While these scenarios have kept me up at night, they have also caused me to look beyond blaming the candidate and/or the process itself and have lead me to identify where the fault actually lies--in the relationship between recruiter and candidate.

Going forward, I have found that where trust is absent, it is best for me to let the candidate work with another recruiter. Likewise, if you do not feel like you can trust your recruiter, you should move on. Without trust, a good candidate can go bad. With trust, a good candidate will be exceptional.