



ATTORNEY SEARCH

by Stephen Seckler

Help in finding an entry level job

Q. I have been having difficulty in obtaining interviews for a position as an associate. I graduated from law school in May of 1999 and my resume shows substantial full-time legal experience. Would you have any suggestions for head hunters? It seems that whenever I contact a recruitment firm for help, the response is that I do not have enough attorney experience for recruitment purposes. Do you know how recent graduates are placed? I would sincerely appreciate your comments.

A. I'm sorry to hear that you have been having so much difficulty finding permanent work as an associate. It is not unreasonable to think that, after three years of hard work in law school, you would have many job opportunities awaiting you after graduation.

But even in an "up" economy, it can still take a while to land your first "real" legal job. Despite the time that has passed since you graduated, let me reassure you that you can still look forward to a long and fruitful career as an attorney.

Based on your current situation, I will assume that you are not someone who graduated from law school with "top academics." As you probably know, most law students with strong academic credentials are recruited by major firms in on-campus fall recruiting. Those "top students" who choose not to pursue this route are likely to stand out from the pack when they apply for other jobs (e.g., with government agencies, smaller firms, corporations or nonprofit organizations).

But since the number of lawyers with strong academic credentials is small in comparison to the bar as a whole, the good news is that aside from positions at large firms, there are still numerous opportunities for everyone else. The only caveat is that sometimes these jobs are harder to find because these employers have no set hiring schedule.

Since you have to work harder to find these jobs, one natural reaction would be to send out as many resumes and cover letters as possible. While some law school graduates in your situation do find jobs this way, I would suggest that there are other job search strategies you can employ that have a much higher probability of success.

In particular, I would recommend that you concentrate your efforts on informational interviewing (a/k/a networking). Networking is a process of building professional relationships so that you move from being a faceless resume to being a hard-working lawyer with a lot of drive and a strong work ethic.

I am not sure what you mean when you say that you have “substantial legal experience,” but my three guesses are that you worked as a paralegal before law school, you went to Northeastern and had four co-op jobs, or you worked full-time as a law clerk while you went to law school at night. Whatever the case may be, you probably have a number of contacts in the legal community that can serve as a good starting place for your networking.

I would also be on the lookout for potential employers who have temporary or part-time staffing needs. Taking a position on less than a full-time permanent basis is an excellent way to get your foot in the door somewhere. It is a way to gain more experience and build some credibility with a potential employer without the employer having to assume much risk. I have seen this strategy work well for lawyers and non-lawyers.

You may also want to pick up some pro bono work in the area that is of interest to you to demonstrate that you really have the commitment. (Employers like to hire individuals who are very interested in the work that the employer does.)

PAGE 2

If you do decide to take a position that is something less than a permanent full-time job, you should be careful to do something that will be perceived to be a stepping stone to the job you would like.

If you want to represent small businesses in transactional matters and provide general business counsel, then do not take a position helping a small firm with its litigation.

It may also not be such a great idea to take a job as a paralegal if you want to be perceived as a lawyer. The only exception to this is that if you are in financial distress, obviously your need to earn income now may trump your efforts to move your career in the direction that you would like to ultimately go.

In addition to avoiding the classifieds, you should probably stay away from recruiters. Recruiters are only involved in lateral movement of attorneys. In general, clients call upon recruiters to find attorneys who already have the experience that the client needs (i.e., they are already trained and can step in and immediately begin doing the job.)

Since recruiting fees are high, the employers who use recruiters are generally looking for a certain candidate profile. This usually translates into junior to mid-level associates with two-to-five years of experience at a top law firm, or partners with significant portable billings (i.e., several hundred thousand dollars).

For in-house searches, “pedigree” is sometimes less important; but significant work experience that matches the employer’s need is very important.

You may want to purchase the book “Guerilla Tactics for Getting the Legal Job of Your Dreams” (1999, Kimm Alayne Walton, Harcourt/Brace.) This book contains some excellent strategies for someone in your situation. In it you will also find encouraging anecdotes that illustrate the power of a more personalized approach.

Most importantly, do not lose hope or perspective. One year may seem like a long time right now, but once you have been working full-time as a lawyer for several years, it will not seem so significant.

Keep a positive attitude (even if you have to fake it) and someone will give you the break you need to launch your career in the direction that it deserves to go.