



ATTORNEY SEARCH

by A. Harrison Barnes, Esq.

The best attorneys want information

Introduction

As a legal recruiter, I am often quite surprised in the difference between how receptive different attorneys are to information. When an associate is called by a recruiter out of the blue, they are often extremely suspicious, declare they are not interested in speaking with the recruiter at all, brag about how happy they are and then get off the phone as quickly as possible. Successful partners and associates tend to do the opposite. An event of a couple of weeks ago comes to mind.

A recruiter of ours called an associate at a law firm. The associate told the recruiter in no uncertain terms that they were extremely happy where they were and would never consider another opportunity under any circumstances. The associate also warned the recruiter that they “better be careful” because the associate worked directly with the hiring partner of this law firm. The recruiter (who is used to recruiting high level partners) was amused by this. About 10 minutes later, the recruiter called the hiring partner at the same firm. The partner told the recruiter that, for the right opportunity, he and “some of his associates” would be interested in moving. The partner questioned the recruiter for about 60 minutes about opportunities in the market and the recruiter eventually had to get the partner off the phone to get home for dinner. The partner told the recruiter he wanted him to come down and speak with him when he had some time.

What many attorneys do not realize-but should-is that information about the job market can be one of the most important resources for the advancement of their careers. Because I am a legal recruiter, I know that top associates and partners inside law firms often keep a dialogue going with recruiters for years. They do this not because they are unhappy, bored, or underpaid, but because they want to know about information about the market. As an attorney, there are few things you can do with your time that are more productive than learning about what is going on in the market: your career (and you) are both commodities and you want to make the best use of this commodity.

While many of these partners and associates may not move for years (or ever), they are always keeping an open dialogue. It is much more common for better attorneys to keep an ongoing dialogue with a recruiter than it is for lesser attorneys. The reason, I believe, is that excellent attorneys realize their career is a commodity that needs a market to thrive. A recruiter offers the attorney knowledge about the market for their skills, as well as other general information about the job market. Regardless of how you get this information, it can be extremely useful.

This article analyzes the importance of information to your legal career. Regardless of whether you are happy

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or unhappy with your current employment situation, you should know that good information can make all the difference. Information is useful (indeed essential) to your legal career because it (1) lets you know if you are on the right track, (2) gives you options, and (3) can improve your life and career.

Information lets you know if you are on the right track

Most of us have weak points that we like to avoid. If you are overweight, you may want to avoid the scale. If you have difficulty saving money, you may want to avoid looking at your bank balance. If you are unhappy, you may want to avoid happy people. Seeing aspects of ourselves that we are not necessarily proud of and confronting these aspects is never easy. The same holds true for your legal career.

One of the largest benefits of information is that it can let you know if you are on the right track. Legal recruiters deal with employers all day long. They know the sorts of attorneys that are likely to get interviews and how marketable each attorney is. Accordingly, a good legal recruiter can almost always tell you if you are marketable after speaking with you for 10-15 minutes. Moreover, the better a legal recruiter gets to know you, the more he can tell you about where, specifically, you are marketable. Once you have this information at your disposal, you can know how you are doing. If you are not marketable, you can ask the recruiter why. If you are extremely marketable, you can also ask the recruiter why.

It is very easy for attorneys to get off track in their legal careers. If attorneys are concerned about feeling good about themselves and not confronting the potentially negative aspects of their experiences, they can get seriously off track. You can get off track without even knowing it. In law firms, there are numerous ways attorneys can get off track. Some of these include (1) being in a law firm where they are getting too specialized, (2) not getting enough experience for an attorney of your class level, (3) being overworked without the opportunity to ever bring in business, (4) being increasingly underpaid compared to your peers the more your career advances, (5) being in an environment where you are unlikely to ever advance, or even (6) not being aggressively critiqued and developing negative work habits.

Most attorneys have no idea what makes them on track or off track, even though they think they do. There are numerous aspects of an attorney's position with a given employer that can rapidly throw them off track. Being aware of these aspects of your career is something that can only help you. A legal recruiter can point these out to you and assist you in realizing what may be wrong.

When you are speaking with a legal recruiter about the market, you are essentially speaking with an "ambassador" of the market itself. A good legal recruiter is quite intimately attached to the market and knows the pitfalls attorneys can fall into. The recruiter makes their living on identifying attorneys who are on the right track. Because it is in the recruiter's best interest to work with the best attorneys, even a negative conversation with a legal recruiter can be beneficial to you. A legal recruiter can tell you what is wrong and once you know that, you can do your best to change it - at your current employer or elsewhere.

In this respect, a good recruiter is not at all unlike a coach. A good coach makes you aware of your weaknesses and helps you improve your game. Most top athletes and others have a top coach involved in their careers.

When you consider that a legal recruiter is like a coach, it should not be surprising that the best attorneys tend to be quite open to speaking with a legal recruiter. You need to understand that in many employment environments, it is not always in the employer's best interest to point out your weaknesses, the weakness of the experience they are providing you, the lack of advancement potential available to you and the fact that you are not going to be marketable after a few more years with them. A legal recruiter can do this. This is one reason why I think the best attorneys are the ones who speak with legal recruiters the most enthusiastically.

Information gives you options

Young attorneys are often the most adverse to knowing what is going on in the market. Among all the reasons I believe this is true is that young attorneys do not know the necessity of having options. Most senior attorneys, in contrast, know the importance of having options at all times. They come to think of this as a necessity.

Any attorney who has been practicing for more than 10 years has almost undoubtedly been involved with a legal employer that (1) has run into serious economic straits at some point and let numerous attorneys go for "performance difficulties" (or simply been honest and termed these staff reductions as layoffs), (2) gone out of business, (3) has fired him or her with little notice and for no apparent reason, or (4) known attorneys that have been the victim of these reductions. Accordingly, the more senior an attorney gets, the more they are willing to listen to a recruiter that knows what is going on in the job market.

Knowing about available positions in the market, and where you are marketable, gives you options. An attorney that communicates with recruiters (or employs other means to learn of job openings) knows that if they need to, they can move-and often move quickly. Most attorneys that are in firms that are in financial trouble, or that are let go for no apparent reason, have little idea what is coming until it is too late. Speaking with a recruiter on an ongoing basis, or even just being aware of what is happening in the market, can help you avoid this.

Most good recruiters know this. If a recruiter is calling you every six to seven months, for example, she is trying to stay fresh in your mind. Having her business card on hand can really help you if things ever go wrong at your employer. If you are planning on a career in the law, the chances are things will go wrong at your employer at some time in your career. When you need a recruiter's help, you need to ensure that you are on good terms with her.

Information can improve your life and career and fulfill your needs

I speak with attorneys all day long, all week long. I am also an attorney and have numerous friends and acquaintances that are attorneys. Many of them are unhappy, even though a large proportion of these attorneys enjoy some aspect of what they are doing. For example, a litigator may enjoy writing motions but hate going to court. A patent attorney may love doing electrical patents, but hate doing mechanical ones. One attorney may want shorter hours, another may want more money.

Everyone wants something different. Regardless of what your unique needs are as an attorney, the chances are that if your needs are reasonable, there is an employer out there that offers something very close to what you are seeking. This is almost a given. If an attorney has needs that are not being satisfied in their current employment situation, he can likely find it if he keeps a dialogue with a recruiter going long enough. A recruiter is likely to know - more than any other source - who that specific employer is.

By getting information, you have the ability to improve your life and career. All you need to do is ask for it.

I have often been amazed when I am carrying out searches for a given law firm. Attorneys often do not want to know that something better is out there, despite the fact that it is. When you receive a telephone call from a recruiter, she may be calling you to say something like the following:

"John, listen. My client is more prestigious, pays 50% more money than you are making in your current position and will require you to work less on work you will enjoy more."

Everyone has reasons for staying at their current employer and if your current employer treats you well, then you should stay. Nevertheless, if knowing about an opening or a need at a particular firm can really change your life

that much, you should certainly do your best to learn that information.

Conclusions

When you think about it, information is an extremely valuable commodity. It serves the purpose that it can reassure you, correct you if you are doing something wrong (i.e., coach you), offer you security and potentially improve your life and career.

Far too few attorneys seek out information, or absorb it when they get it. Some of the most valuable conversations I have ever had are ones where people have given me information that I can use to improve my career. A call from a recruiter, or knowledge about specific openings is just that. Make the most of the information out there.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, the best attorneys want and indeed crave information. The reason, I suspect, is that there is nothing negative about this information whatsoever. Indeed, this information helps you grow as an attorney-no matter how you make use of it.