



ATTORNEY SEARCH

by Stephen Seckler

Is your networking working

Every day, I receive phone calls, faxes, e-mail messages and letters from attorneys seeking employment. I run a recruiting business and it is only natural that job seekers contact me. "It's what I do." But the truth is, I can only help a small percentage of those who inquire. Legal recruiting is a specialized business and while there is no shortage of attorneys looking to make a lateral move, for the most part, employers who use recruiters have a very particular profile in mind. Generally, they are looking for junior to mid-level associates with major firm experience and top law school academics (partners with portable billings that exceed \$350K will also do).

I receive numerous inquiries from attorneys who do not meet these criteria. Many seem like very talented lawyers who haven't had big firm training or did not attend a prestigious law school. Others are associates with top credentials who are looking for in-house or non-legal positions (we can help a small percentage of these candidates to the extent that we have in-house listings that mesh with their interests and experience.) But for the majority of those who inquire, all we can do is offer words of encouragement and suggest that the job seeker do a lot of "networking".

For me, this is the hardest part about the legal recruiting business. The more that someone needs my placement services, the less likely it is that I can place them. In the spirit of trying to help those who are unlikely to find work through a recruiter, I have put together some thoughts on how to effectively network.

Career professionals have touted the importance of networking for two decades. A lot has also been written on the subject. I know many professionals who have used networking effectively to find a great job or cultivate more clients. However, most of the attorneys that I come in contact with are at sea when it comes to networking. That's because networking is a learned skill that is not taught in law school.

Networking Is About Building A Community

The objective of networking is to build a community of contacts that will be there to help you when you have a need. In reality, most of us do not start networking until we do need something (e.g. a job). But effective networking does not mean asking a lot of employers to hire you (even if that is your objective). Rather it is a process of information gathering.

When you network, you are asking for career advice. You are learning what it is like to practice in a certain area of the law. You are getting an assessment of your credentials from someone who knows your practice area. You are seeking advice on how to get your foot in the door somewhere; and last, but not least, you are asking the

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contact to suggest anyone else who might be worth speaking to (e.g. someone who might have need of your services-or who might know someone who might have a need).

At the same time, you are immersing yourself in a community of contacts who may hear about job openings from time to time and who do some hiring as well. It is an interesting paradox. If you approach someone who has no current hiring needs and you say you are looking for a job, they will be unlikely to spend much time with you. But if you approach the same person and indicate that you would like their advice, they are more likely to meet with you regardless of their staffing needs.

Networking is a powerful tool that can be hard work, but also a lot of fun. If you are an inquisitive person, you will learn a lot if you listen carefully. In order to help you, the following are some suggestions that have worked for me.

1 - Be Realistic

Networking is a process of building relationships. If you are trying to build a community for yourself, you can't expect it to happen overnight. Furthermore, the more senior you are in your career, the longer it will take to find what you seek. At the more junior level, finding a "hidden" job could take several months. At a more senior level, networking can take longer. I recently learned about an assistant general counsel who spent 2 + years cultivating relationships that led to a great in-house job. When he started the networking process, he was already a partner at major downtown Boston law firm.

2- Keep In Touch With Contacts Over Time And Take The Time To Thank Them

Personal relationships build over time. In the same vein, professional relationships need to be nurtured over time. Don't expect success from your first meeting with a good contact. They hardly know you and probably feel a limited commitment to your success. This can grow over time but the key point is that time is necessary. So understand that an initial conversation is only the first step. You need to come back to your contacts every few months.

Personally, I find this to be the hardest part about networking. If you meet with someone in September, what do you say to him or her in mid-January when you are still looking for a new job? And what if you are still looking in May? The answer is actually simple. First, make sure to send a brief thank you note within 48 hours of your first meeting. If you promised to send something at that first meeting (e.g. a magazine article or a piece of information that is useful to them) make sure to enclose this with the thank you letter.

Several months later, you can drop them a quick note saying that you are still looking. In the note, ask them if they've heard of anyone who may have need of your services. Another tactic is to send them a copy of an article that you think may be of interest to them. Or you can call them on the phone and in a very brief conversation, ask if they've heard of anything. In short, if there's not much to talk about then it is fine to keep it short. The point is to keep reminding them that you exist.

Even when you successfully find a job through networking, do not stop. The next time you "need" something, you will not be starting from scratch (i.e. your network will already be established). A good place to start is when you have landed a new job. You should take the opportunity to thank all of your contacts once again and let them know where you have ended up. I have received letters like this and I can say from personal experience that they make a big impression. I can also say from personal experience that failing to thank someone can really hurt your reputation. I was recently at a function for in-house counsel and ran into someone who never communicated with me after our initial conversation. I found out that this person had done the same to several others in the room and we all left the meeting with a very bad impression of this attorney.

3-Looking For Work In All The Wrong Places

Reading the classified ads in Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly and reviewing job listings on the Internet can be comforting. It provides you with concrete evidence that someone is hiring lawyers. Similarly, dropping letters in a mailbox gives you a sense of accomplishment. But responding to ads is probably the number one reason why networking can fail.

Perusing the classifieds can be part of your job search strategy. If your credentials match closely with the requirements posted in an ad and the job interests you, do take the time to follow-up. But if the ad calls for three to five years of litigation experience and you have 15, then you are probably wasting your time. If the ad calls for experience in closing commercial real estate loans and your experience is purely residential, then it is unlikely that your resume will rise to the top of the pile. In today's legal job market, when an employer places an ad for someone with "x" experience, if this experience is not on the resume, then the resume will end up in the trash.

In short, there are only so many hours in the day. If you spend a lot of your time on activities that have little likelihood of bearing fruit (i.e. like responding to ads when you are unlikely to get an interview), you'll have less time for activities that afford you a much higher probability of success.

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4-Be Persistent And Respectful

Perhaps it is already evident to you, but lawyers are very busy and may not return your phone calls right away. Perseverance can really pay off in the busy world we live in. I can think of instances where it took me 20 phone calls to finally connect with a professional who I wanted to meet. Try to find out from the contact's secretary a good time of day to reach the individual. You may even want to try calling before or after hours when secretaries are not in the office.

In being persistent, however, it is important to respect the needs of the potential contact. It is not a good idea to leave ten messages for someone in one day. In fact you may want to try calling on several different days without leaving a message before resorting to voicemail. If you do reach someone on the phone, ask him or her if it is a good time to speak or try to set up a time when he or she can meet with you in person. If you got their name from another contact, start the conversation with something like "John Smith suggested I give you a call".

If you feel more comfortable doing so, send a brief letter of introduction to the potential contact. DO NOT ENCLOSE YOUR RESUME! (Remember, you are not asking them for a job.) Also, do not be surprised if the contact does not remember your letter when you speak to them on the phone. Continue the conversation as you would if you had not sent them anything.

5-Know When To Cut Bait

An equally inefficient way of networking is being overly persistent. In the above example I cited 20 phone calls before I was able to connect with a particular contact. But in that instance, the contact had already begun calling me back. If in the course of a two-week period you leave five messages for someone and they fail to call you back, it is probably time to stop trying. It's easy to fall into the trap of deciding that there is someone who you must reach. Certainly there are some lawyers who can be very influential in helping your career. But it is also important to realize that someone's willingness to help is just as important as his or her ability to help.

6-Anyone Can Build A Network From Scratch

When I finished law school and began working at MCLE, I had very few contacts in the Massachusetts bar. When I left MCLE 8 years later, I was able to put together a mailing list of over 2000 leading attorneys in Massachusetts. Initially, I was introduced to some of the leading attorneys and judges. But after a while, I began to cultivate relationships on my own largely through cold calling.

Attorneys who are not well connected have the misperception that you need to be related to a Rockefeller in order to be successful at networking. Of course if you are a Rockefeller, you have a good head start on the rest

of us. But anyone can build a network from the ground up. You just need to be a little creative in how you try to connect with people.

The best opening line is always “[so and so] suggested that I give you a call”. If you do not have a name to mention, you can try calling alumni from your law school or undergraduate institution. Sometimes your law professors can put you in contact with the right people. One of my favorite cold calling techniques is to read an article that someone has written and call the author (and remember that compliments can go a long way-- if they are sincere.)

You can also make connections by approaching a speaker at a CLE program or a bar association meeting. Try not take too much of their time at the session. Simply find out if it is okay to call them in their office. You can also call a lawyer who has been mentioned in the legal or popular press (“I was reading Lawyers Weekly this week and noticed that you recently prevailed in a very interesting case involving eminent domain...”). Getting involved in a high profile bar association committee is another way to develop contacts. Make sure to focus on the needs of the committee as you begin to cultivate relationships (i.e. do not focus on your need for a new job).

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7 -- Keep Your Volume Of Contacts High

It is hard to appreciate how time-consuming networking can be. It is also hard to realize how many contacts you really need to make an order to be successful. There are stories of attorneys who find a new position in a matter of weeks. But these success stories are far from the norm. If you really want to reach a critical mass that is likely to bring you success, you should be thinking about making 5 to 10 contacts week. Of these 5 to 10 contacts, perhaps you'll only meet with one or two of them in person. The rest of these contacts will be by phone or by mail (setting up future meetings, checking in on contacts with whom you have not spoken several months, forwarding an article that you thought might be of interest to someone on your contact list, making cold calls, etc.)

8 -- Ask Not What Your Contacts Can Do For You; Ask What You Can Do For Your Contacts

It is easy see networking as a one-way street. After all, you are the one doing the networking. You are the one who needs a job or wants to make a lateral move. But by making small talk and by being a good listener, you may discover that there is some way that you can be of assistance to the person with whom you are networking. For example, if they have a son who is interested in the music business and you have a friend who produces records for local bands, you can offer to hook the son up with your friend. Or maybe you know a lot about computer software, and the contact is trying to select a new database program to manage the firm's docket. Or in the course of your discussion, you mention an article that you have read and he or she seems interested in seeing a copy.

Being helpful to others is not a bad way to run your life in general, but it is also a good way to cement relationships. It is human nature to want to help someone who has helped you. If helping the person involves some kind follow-up, doing the follow-up is also a way to demonstrate that you are a conscientious individual.

Conclusion

There is no single way to find a job through networking. You have to use an approach that is consistent with your personality and that feels comfortable to you. But if you take the time to cultivate relationships and you do your best to be a resource to others, you will find what you seek. You may not get there in one step, but along the way you will minimize the volume of rejection letters that end up in your mailbox, keep your pride intact and have a skill that will be helpful to you many times during your career.