



ATTORNEY SEARCH

By Stephen E. Seckler

Is Anyone Out There Happy?

The media has tremendous power to magnify economic trends. When dot-com mania ruled, we read about lawyers and other professionals joining start-up companies in droves. There was a pervasive message that an epidemic of lawyers were leaving law-firm practice in search of stock options, subsequent wealth and early retirement.

Today the discourse focuses on the latest layoffs. Instead of reading about lawyers who achieve great paper wealth before the age of 30, we hear about law firms cutting back on bonuses and perks, lowering or freezing salaries, and even letting associates go.

In reality, the majority of lawyers in law-firm practice never had a chance to seek their fortunes at fast-growing companies during the roaring '90s (though many wanted to).

Similarly, the vast majority of lawyers employed today are likely to have the same jobs in six months and those who are unemployed are likely to be fully employed in the same time frame.

There is a simple message in all of this. While current employment statistics can be sobering and may make for good cocktail chat, it is important to keep a positive attitude and not to let your personal aspirations be ruled by these general trends. After all, if you are in the job market (due to a layoff or because you need a change), you are not looking for 100,000 jobs. You are only looking for one.

Have The Right Attitude In Public

Companies hire individuals who demonstrate a high level of interest in the employer and show a positive attitude about contributing towards the success of the firm.

Consequently, the last thing you want to do when you are job hunting is to focus too much on the shrinking size of the classifieds and the grim news on the business pages. To paraphrase my son's first grade teacher, "If you think you can [find a job], you might; if you think you can't, you're right."

You may not always feel optimistic about your prospects; but it is counterproductive to articulate your negative emotions in public. If you feel the need to vent, look to friends, family and other unemployed colleagues for support.

When you are unemployed, it is critical to get exercise and take the time to do some things that you enjoy. Find constructive ways to structure and fill your free time so that you feel valuable.

Take on pro bono or non-legal volunteer activities and look for activities that may expose you to potential employers. Attend Massachusetts Bar Association or Boston Bar Association lunches on topics that interest you and make a point of talking to at least one person you do not know.

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Write an article on a topic that you want employers to associate with you and get it published. Spend more time with your children or partner, train for a bike-a-thon, brush up on the piano or get caught up on world affairs.

Though you can expect ups and downs, you will find that if you make constructive use of your free time, it will be easier to project a positive image of yourself when you do meet with prospective employers.

Don't eschew all jobs with start-up companies. Do the proper risk analysis. Too many lawyers jumped to dot-coms, never considering the potential downside. With all of the negative publicity surrounding the demise of many tech companies, it is easy to go too far in the other direction (i.e., avoid the risk entirely). But younger companies can often offer some of the most interesting opportunities for growth.

Look For The Best Package And Stay Focused

Every job is a series of tradeoffs. Figure out what is most important in your career now (chance to manage others, opportunity to try a new practice area, ability to work in a supportive environment).

Weigh opportunities against these factors. But don't expect to find a job that meets 100 percent of your needs. Any office will have some people you do not like working with and some work you would rather not do.

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Furthermore, staying focused on a particular practice area or industry will set you apart from the pack. Looking for "anything" smells of desperation. Telling people in your network that you are looking for "anything" will also make it much more difficult for people to help you.

Tell them the one or two things you are looking for (e.g., "I am looking for a position as a corporate generalist with a mid-sized company in the financial services business; I would also consider a position as a corporate associate in a mid-sized firm that represents this industry.")

Because of the way our memories work, it is easier to remember someone if you can make a specific association with that person.

You may need to compromise more in a recessionary environment and you may come across opportunities that do not precisely meet your search criteria. You should consider these opportunities as they present themselves. But do not succumb to the temptation to broaden your search generally.

Look For Temp Assignments And Don't Give Up

Look for temp assignments that have future prospects. While a temp agency may be part of your strategy, you are probably better off making your own contacts. Temp agencies tend to have lower level work (e.g., a firm or company that needs an army of lawyers to help review discovery documents or perform due diligence in a large merger).

Ask the lawyers in your network whether they know anyone who might be busy enough to need temp help.

Don't lose perspective but be realistic. High-paying jobs take time to find in a good economy. It is therefore especially important to keep up your level of contacts in a down economy.

For most of us, job hunting is a very unpleasant experience. No one likes rejection and anyone looking for a job as a professional is likely to experience a lot of rejection – even in a strong economy.

If you keep the proper perspective and continue to remind yourself that unemployment is only a temporary state, you are likely to feel better about yourself and more likely to make a good impression when you are speaking with a potential employer.

You will also be more motivated to keep your level of contacts high, which in turn will expose you to more opportunity.

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