



By A. Harrison Barnes

## Choosing a Legal Recruiter

Working with a legal recruiter is the smartest decision a good attorney can make. Legal recruiters typically operate in the “upper echelons” of the legal profession and for people who are suited for their services legal recruiters are the absolute best career resources.

Legal recruiters can identify the best opportunities for you; will counsel you on your move; will provide you inside information about the various employers you are investigating; will draw out your strengths and present them to employers in a convincing way; will provide a “valuable prescreening” function for the employers and just by their virtue of representing you, provide you with a good entrance to the employer. In fact, many of the largest and most selective law firms rarely look at candidates unless they come from a preferred legal recruiter. For example, numerous candidates I have represented at BCG Attorney Search may have not even received a response when they approached a firm on their own before coming to our firm. A good legal recruiter can make that much of a difference.

There is a catch to using a legal recruiter, however. The main and largest catch is a good legal recruiter cannot and will not work with everyone. In fact, the best legal recruiters will only work with people who are stars. One analogy I like to make is that there are a lot of people out there who play sports but only a very small percentage of people who have sports agents. The same thing applies to using a legal recruiter. I estimate the number is less than one percent of all attorneys out there who should be using a legal recruiter for their job search.

There are a few rules you need to be aware of when considering whether or not to work with a legal recruiter. These are the main rules I would recommend most attorneys follow.

### 1. A Good Legal Recruiter Never Works With Law Students-

Legal recruiters are hired only to find experienced attorneys. There are literally tens of thousands of law students who blanket firms with their resumes each year. Firms (even small ones) generally need no outside assistance to find recent law school graduates to hire. It is very easy for law firms, corporations and others to hire law students.

An important rule to remember about the use of recruiters is this: *They are used only to hire people who have immediately transferable skills.* Transferable skills are picked up by actually working inside a law firm or corporation and being aggressively supervised and having work looked over on a daily basis and having a consistent supply of work. This is much different than the theoretical grounding and other sorts of information that someone picks up in a law school. Many law students are very enthusiastic about their prospects, former jobs they may have held before law school and more. None of these translates into an organization that will want to use a recruiter to fill the job.

Recruiters charge fees to hiring organizations. Because they charge fees, their work is largely covered by the supply and demand. This very simple law states that people will only pay for something when they have to. Rest assured, law firms do not need to pay for law students. In all of my years of recruiting I have never seen a law firm or any other organization use a recruiter to hire a law student.

The caution here is that this does occur. Recruiters will experiment and occasionally try and represent a law student. They should not be doing so.

## **2. A Good Legal Recruiter Only Works With Attorneys With Rare Qualifications Who Are in High Demand-**

This is a loaded statement and does require some explanation. Here are the basics so you know if you fit in this group:

*(a) If you have between 1 and 5 years of experience and are working at a top law firm you are likely a good candidate to use a legal recruiter.*

How do you know if you are working at a "top law firm"? A top law firm is one where most of the attorneys went to top law schools and where most of the attorneys know they are the cream of the crop. Here, the attorneys are generally representing significant corporations in significant matters—whether it be real estate, corporate law, intellectual property, or litigation. If you are working at a top law firm you generally will know it. These law firms are typically among the largest 200 or so in the country and recruit at top 20 law schools regularly. "If you have to ask" is a good analogy for these sorts of firms. There are some exceptions to this. There are often small patent boutiques; small real estate boutiques and other sorts of firms that may not be large but nevertheless are considered excellent shops.

The reason law firms require you generally have between 1 and 5 years of experience is due to the fact it is in this period that you are not a major contender for partnership and your billing rate is still attractive to clients. First, if a law firm hires someone with more than 5 years of experience they will likely be competition for partnership in the firm. This can upset the balance of power among associates who have competed for partnership for years. None of this is to say firms do not hire people beyond this level; however, it is rare.

Second, as someone gets more advanced in their years their billing rate increases. As their billing rate increases it becomes more expensive for them to be given work instead of lesser experienced associates. For example, someone with 8 years of experience who is an associate will likely be doing work at a billing rate compatible with a partner. The client paying the bill would rather have a partner doing the work at a similar billing rate. In addition, the partner would likely also rather do this work themselves and get credit for it rather than farming it out to an associate.

Finally, until you have at least one year of experience you really do not know what you are doing. Remember: The law of supply and demand governs the use of recruiters. There are plenty of attorneys who do not know what they are doing and employers are looking for those who do.

*(b) If you are a partner with a lot of portable business you are likely a good candidate to use a legal recruiter.*

Law firms are businesses and make most of their decisions based on business calculations. If you have a lot of portable business as a partner that will likely be good if you are seeking a position in a law firm. Your billing rate should also be compatible with the new employer. Most partners will have a good idea if they are marketable to another firm and generally do not need to ask if it is appropriate for them to be using a recruiter.

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(c) There are always "in fashion" practice areas that may make you in demand.

During the real estate boom in 2004-2005 real estate attorneys were in demand. Before that in the dot com boom corporate attorneys were in demand. At other times patent prosecutors have been in exceptional demand. That fact is there are always economic cycles that are acting out which make one sort of attorneys far more in demand than another. The way to know if you are in special demand is generally to listen to your phone. If your phone is ringing with lots of solicitations from legal recruiters your practice area is probably in demand. You will generally know if your practice area is in demand.

(d) *"Rare qualifications" can mean different things in different times and places.*

I put this section last because every attorney out there believes they are special. Everyone is special but whether they are special enough to use a legal recruiter is another matter entirely. Going to a top law school and not working at a prestigious firm after law school may make you "rare" in the right market and marketable. Having a certain language may make you rare in the right market. The fact is: You never know what "rare" is. By "rare" it must be quite rare as a general rule.

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If you are a part of the group who should be using a legal recruiter then you should be using a legal recruiter. If you fit into the group above then by all means use a legal recruiter. A good legal recruiter could literally change your life and do so dramatically by ushering you into an outstanding employment situation.

Like all good things a good legal recruiter generally is very organized and also brings a bit of "art" to their work and will generally have a very highly developed way of working. There are very, very few good legal recruiters. Being a good legal recruiter means different things to many people. Being a good legal recruiter is not easy-it is hard. Just like you should "know" if you have the qualifications to use a legal recruiter, you should also "know" a good legal recruiter when you speak with one.