



ATTORNEY SEARCH

By Caroline Lee, Esq

Dear Petunia Partner: Practical Advice for the Everyday Lawyer- Part II

I am pleased to introduce you to Petunia Partner, a lovely figment of my imagination and my homage to all of the wonderful advice columnists of the world. In this second installment, Petunia continues to offer up her very special brand of practical advice for the everyday lawyer. I hope Ms. Partner's lighthearted column helps you to avoid some of the common pitfalls that many lawyers face in today's hectic world. Petunia, take it away...

Dear Petunia:

I am an attorney who has been practicing law for two years. I recently spoke to a career counselor who advised me to shorten my resume. My resume is currently three pages, and I was told I need to cut it down to one page. Do you think this is good advice?

-Three Page Gal in Georgia

Dear Three Page Gal:

Most recruiters and career counselors are in agreement that a one page limit is a good rule of thumb for more junior-level attorneys, like you. For the most part, legal employers are most interested in evaluating your academic pedigree and any relevant legal experience on your resume. Thus, it usually is not necessary or helpful to include prior non-legal experience on your resume that occurred before you attended law school.

The typical format for someone 2-5 years out of law school, where law is the candidate's first career- is to have a membership, education, and employment section. The employment section should include any firm employment, judicial clerkships, alternative types of legal employment, and any legal internships you had during law school. It is usually a good idea to delete any administrative type of positions you held prior to law school, and to use that extra room on your resume to expand on your practical legal experience descriptions.

One caveat to this one page resume rule for recent graduates is if a candidate's first career is not law and his/her prior experience has some relevance to the type of position he/she is seeking now. This exception is especially true for intellectual property attorneys who have a technical background. For example, if a patent associate has four years of engineering experience that the candidate acquired before law school, this experience should definitely be included in the candidate's resume.

**Dear Petunia Partner:
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Dear Petunia:

Do law firms run background checks on the attorneys they interview? If so, how extensive are the background checks?

-Private Citizen in Ohio

Dear Private Citizen:

Most law firms will do some form of background check on their potential hires, but the depths of their investigations seem to vary. Virtually all firms will check with the local state bar to confirm that you are an active member of that bar. In addition, if you are currently working as an associate at a firm, most potential employers will look up your biography on your current employer's web site. Thus, before you start conducting your job search, you should confirm that your biography is 1) on the website and accessible, and 2) that it is up to date with your most recent work experience.

In the beginning stages of your job search, you may also want to start thinking about your professional references. Law firms usually ask for 2-3 partner references at your current firm, to confirm the type of work that you were doing and the quality of your work.

Most large firms will also give a written offer to candidates, and then ask to speak to a candidate's references after he/she has signed the offer letter. To protect your confidentiality, try to hold off on asking for references until the very later stages of the interviewing and job search process. You don't want to "jump the gun" and alert your employer that you are looking at other options, until you are pretty sure that you have another job to go to.

For your references, it is important to choose people that are familiar with your work and that you know will say positive things about you, as most firms make their offers of employment contingent on clearing your references. In other words, if a firm gets a shaky reference from one of your partners, the firm can withdraw your offer of employment- which is a nightmare you want to avoid at all costs.

In addition to references, firms will often perform a conflicts check of the cases and clients you worked on at your current firm, with the new firm's client list. Thus, hold off on giving formal notice to your current firm, until you have passed through all of these preliminary measures with your new potential employer.

One last thing to remember is that a lot of firms are now looking up potential hires on social online networks like www.myspace.com or www.friendster.com. Make sure that anything that is accessible to the public is something you are comfortable with a potential employer seeing. I have recently been hearing a number of stories about candidates who failed to get interviews or job offers because of the types of pictures/written materials the potential employer discovered on their profiles, on these types of social online networks. Use these types of websites with caution.

Dear Ms. Partner:

I have some interviews lined up and was wondering how to handle the question about salary. If an interviewer asks me about my salary range or demand, what should I say?

-Puzzled in Pennsylvania

Dear Puzzled:

This is always a tricky question that I think needs to be handled on a case by case basis. Generally, I recommend stating that you are flexible in regards to salary- as your main priority in your job search is finding a firm that is a great fit for you. After stating this, you can ask if the firm has a range they are thinking of in regards to the

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position you are interested in. If a firm is asking you about salary, this employer is probably very interested in you and wants to see if you are on the same wavelength, as far as compensation goes. If at all possible, try to graciously and politely get the firm to first give you a range so you can avoid over-shooting or under-shooting your salary demand, when posed with this question.

In some circumstances the interviewer may not let you get off that easy and may ask you repeatedly what salary you would like to make or currently make. In this situation you can either stick to your answer about not wanting to disclose a number because you are truly flexible- or you can let the firm know an honest assessment of what you hope to make and why you think you are qualified to make this type of salary. You can also answer this question by saying you wish to make a salary that is in the fair market range for an attorney with your experience and background.

If you do give a range in regards to your salary, you of course run the risk of possibly under-bidding yourself or over-bidding the firm's range. On the other hand, if you remain quiet about your salary range, the firm may interpret this behavior as being secretive and uncooperative. You run risks in both scenarios, so it is best to try to "read" the interviewer as much as possible, to make the best choice in each case. In each different situation, go with your instincts as far as how you should handle this sensitive question.

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Dear Petunia:

I have been on multiple interviews and have been rejected from each firm. I am really disheartened and do not know why I am not receiving any callback interviews. I graduated from a top 25 law school and have decent firm experience. I did recently receive some feedback, where the firm told my recruiter that they passed on me because I didn't seem that interested in the firm during the interview. This was hard to hear because I thought I showed genuine interest during the interview. Please help!

-Disheartened in Sacramento

Dear Disheartened:

If a firm has decided to give you an interview, more likely than not, the firm has already determined that you are qualified for the position that they are trying to fill. Thus, the interview is largely about your presentation of your professional strengths, personality and overall enthusiasm for the firm.

Many intelligent and talented attorneys feel awkward "marketing" themselves in an obvious way, during interviews. They do not want to "toot their own horn" because they do not want to be perceived as conceited or self-important. You want to make sure that you do not feel shy about discussing your strengths and talents, when it is appropriate, in an interview. Remember, your competition will not be shy about telling the firm why he/she is the best candidate for the position- so you really owe it to yourself to present your background and talents in a strong and confident manner. Thus, try to break through any apprehension you have and zealously represent yourself and your background to the firm.

In regards to your personality, you of course want to remain professional, but feel free to also bring out a bit of your true self and sense of humor to the interview. For instance if there are opportunities for a joke or laughter in an interview, take advantage of that and run with it. Humor is a great way to break the ice in an interview and build rapport. It also shows a different personal side to you, which is great for your interviewer to see- as a lot of interviews can be very stuffy and formal. Please note that you should try to analyze your interviewer before you start cracking too many jokes. If your interviewer is more formal, you will want to follow his/her lead and present yourself in a way that fits with your interviewer's communication style.

In regards to enthusiasm about the firm, be sure that it is apparent in the interview that you are excited about this opportunity. Your interviewers are not mind readers, so it is wonderful for them to hear directly from you that you are truly interested in their firm and the open position. Virtually all attorneys want to hire someone who will bring in positive energy into the work environment. Thus, don't make the mistake of being too reserved on this point, where your interviewers may mistake your lack of enthusiasm as indifference.

**Dear Petunia Partner:
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If after marketing yourself effectively in an interview, you still do not get the callback- try not to let it affect your self-confidence. Stay positive in your thinking and keep at it until you find the right firm for you. Although the job search process may take longer for you than others, if you keep trying- there is a good chance you will find a firm that really is the perfect fit for you.

Dear Ms. Partner:

I am currently a summer associate in a large law firm in Los Angeles. Recently, I started having feelings for one of the attorneys at the firm, who is part of the summer hiring committee. Are there any formal rules as far as dating someone in this type of situation? He's a great guy, but I don't want to jeopardize my future career on a summer fling. Please advise.

-Newbie in Los Angeles

Dear Newbie:

Each firm tends to have different policies regarding dating among co-workers. That being said, I would strongly advise that you hold off on dating anyone at the firm, especially during your summer internship. Too many things can go wrong, and it isn't worth risking a potential offer at the firm, for a summer romance.

As an attorney and legal recruiter, I have heard many cautionary tales about summer associates who failed to get permanent offers from their firms. In one case, there was a summer associate who dated an attorney at the firm- and the entire summer hiring committee found out. At the end of her internship, this summer associate did not get an offer. Since there were no other apparent mitigating factors for this summer associate not getting an offer, many speculated that she failed to get an offer because she dated one of the associates at the firm during the summer- and that this was perceived as being unprofessional.

In the grand scheme of things, this seems to be a questionable reason for a summer associate to not receive a permanent offer from a firm. In reality however, many firms would see this type of behavior by a summer associate, as a negative. Thus, as much as is possible, try to avoid dating one of your colleagues at the firm (especially during your summer internship). In addition, please be aware that during this summer- you are constantly being evaluated by the firm. Retain a high level of professionalism throughout the summer, whether you are at a happy hour with some of the other associates at the firm or at a weekend retreat. If you drink alcohol, keep your consumption to a minimum and try to make the best impression you can throughout the summer. Good luck!

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