

Geography and the Job Search

It is easy for attorneys to conclude that today's legal market sucks. There has been a pandemic of layoffs, sending countless attorneys into what can feel like a non-existent job market. However, if you are one of these talented but unemployed attorneys searching for employment, one of the easiest ways to increase your chances of getting a job is to cast a broad net in terms of job applications and entertain jobs outside of your current geographic location.

Applying to jobs across the country will definitely increase your chances of an interview, but it is important to realize that firms are receiving thousands of resumes from qualified candidates, and often the preference is for someone local. If the firm is not limited to candidates who are local they will undoubtedly want to know the connection you have to their location. If you cannot provide such a connection, the firm is likely to conclude that you are interested in the firm out of desperation and once the economy bounces back, you will high tail it out of there and head back "home."

But fear not. This does not mean that you are limited to applying for jobs in your current geographic location. It just means that you should take the time to provide an explanation in your cover letter detailing your connection to the area and why you are willing to move there. I guarantee this will help. In fact, I have had a number of candidates relocate during this economy after providing a convincing explanation as to their reasons for wanting to relocate.

Below are a few things to think about when crafting your explanation to the firms:

Have you ever lived in or around the city in which the firm is located?

The next best thing to a candidate who currently resides in a particular location is the candidate who has previously lived there for a significant amount of time. Ideally, the time you lived there would be during your legal career, but do not minimize the importance of having lived in the location as a small child or during college. In these cases, it may be that you fell in love with the location and/or geography or established close relationships with people there. You may have even had to leave the city involuntarily, if your parents' careers required relocating to a different region or you finished up college, found yourself unemployed and were therefore forced to live with your parents in another city or town.

No matter what the circumstances, emphasize the connection you have established to the city by living there, even if it was for a short period of time.

If you have not lived in the specific geographic location, have you visited there? Once or many times?

Living in the city is not the only way to establish a connection to the city. If you have visited a particular area and determined that it is where you want to reside, explain this to a firm. Recently, I worked with a candidate whose father went to college in Denver, and as a result he and his Dad made a number of trips to Denver throughout the candidate's childhood and young adulthood. When it came time to choose the geographic location(s) for us to target through the job search, he was adamant that we focus on Denver. By visiting the city numerous times, he had determined that the culture, climate and size of the city were what he was looking for.

Do you have family in or around the city?

Firms tend to believe that family members will help a candidate stay in one place. For example, if a candidate moves to the city that her parents relocated to a few years prior, a firm is likely to feel more comfortable that the candidate is headed there on a long-term basis. After all, we all know how difficult it can be to leave one's

mother!

Even if your parents don't live in the targeted location but other, more extended family do, mention this in the cover letter. Family of all kinds can be a powerful thing, and we often tend to migrate to those we know and love. A firm is likely to understand your interest in a city if you explain that 13 of your cousins live there and you have visited them on numerous occasions.

Do you have a network of close friends in the specific geographic location?

What if you have no family in the area? What about close friends? In my experience, young candidates are often reluctant to mention this as a connection because they fear that a firm will think he or she is moving there just to "party" with friends, but this is not necessarily the case. I recently worked with a young woman who contacted me about relocating from New York to Chicago. She has only been to Chicago a handful of times and she had absolutely no family in or around the area. However, four of her closest friends had lived here for a number of years, and she wanted to join them. This, coupled with her attraction to Chicago's legal market, help secure her multiple interviews.

Is there something particularly attractive to you about the geographic location?

This can cut both ways. No Denver firm wants to hear that a candidate wants to move to Denver to be a ski bum on the weekends. However, if you chose your words correctly, you can explain to a firm that the outdoor activities in and around Denver are attractive to you. Alone this may not create a strong connection, but coupled with other connections, it can help make your explanation more convincing.

For example, I had a candidate from New York who called me about a position in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He had no family or friends there, but he and his wife had visited the area a few years prior and fallen in love with the many lakes surrounding the area. They were avid sailors and had a small boat that they longed to use on a regular basis. They did plenty of research on the city and discovered that the cost of living was much lower than New York (big surprise), which they were also looking for in the move. We crafted a letter explaining his desire to move to Michigan for the cost of living and geography (as well as the strength of the firm to which he was applying), and the firm granted him an interview.

Do you have a strong attraction to the particular firm or the practice area of the firm for which you would be willing to relocate?

This connection can be very powerful. Certain cities are known for practicing certain areas of law, while there is no market for this area of law in other places. If you are an expert in government contracts, chances are you are going to be interested in Washington, D.C., even if you have no other connection to the area. Likewise, if you are in a niche area of law only practiced by a small number of firms, you may not have the luxury of choosing where you get to practice. For example, I recently worked with an affordable housing associate with spectacular experience as well as an LL.M. in Tax from a top school. Affordable housing work is not a common area of law, especially in the current economic [downturn](#), so I made it clear to him that I would only represent him if he was willing to look in a wide variety of cities. He agreed, and we sent resumes to firms in ten different cities. He ultimately accepted an offer from a top firm in St. Louis, a city he had never been to before the interview. Despite this lack of connection to the city, he was able to convince the group that he was serious about staying in the area of affordable housing even if it meant moving to an unfamiliar city.

Are you barred in the State to which you want to relocate?

It goes without saying that being licensed to practice in a specific state will definitely help establish your

connection to the specific area. After all, anyone who has ever taken a bar exam knows that no one on earth would take a bar in a state in which they had no desire or intention to practice. Taking (and passing) the bar exam in the state of the firm you are targeting shows a dedication to practicing in the area and usually makes firms much more comfortable with the idea of you relocating there.

For example, I am currently working with a young litigator who wants to move to Iowa with his wife, who is originally from Des Moines. He has no connection whatsoever to Iowa, but because he and his wife made a long term plan to move there, he took the Iowa bar last February and we just recently started his search. So far, it appears that his decision to take the bar when he did is going to benefit him greatly.

If not already barred, are you planning to take the bar or are you eligible to waive in?

Taking the bar before you know for sure if you will get a job in a certain geographic location can be unrealistic for an attorney who works the hours [attorneys](#) work. So, if it is not possible for you to take the bar before beginning your search, at the very minimum, research the deadlines for signing up for the bar and the requirements for you to sit for said bar. If you have worked for a handful of years, figure out if your current state has reciprocity with the state to which you want to relocate, and if so, begin the waive-in process. That way, you can accurately state that you are in the process of obtaining licensure in the targeted state.

See [Guidelines on Reciprocity or "Admission On Motion" among the States as per American Bar Association](#) for more information.

In the end, we all hope that our credentials and experience alone will be attractive enough to out of state firms to warrant an interview, but this is often not so. Especially in a down market, firms are flooded with resumes of very qualified candidates, many of whom are likely local. If you want to convince a firm that you are serious about making the move and staying there long term, you have to explain your connection. Trust me, it can make all the difference.