

Interview Skills 101: Focusing on the Positive

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If you are currently on the job market, it is likely that you are looking to improve a mediocre or unpromising situation, or are even trying to escape a bad situation. Whether you are a partner or an associate, there are some important reasons that maintaining a positive tone in your conversations with future employers makes you more attractive.

It has been said many times that looking for your ideal next job is a lot like dating. Like a potential mate, your future employer wants to feel wanted, and not like they are simply the best you could do under the circumstances. No one wants to date a person who is simply looking for a way out of a bad situation, and seeks a soft place to land. As an interviewee, you will do well to demonstrate to your potential employer that you are successful and wanted in your current firm, and that you are choosing them out of many excellent options, because they are truly the best fit for you. Wouldn't you date that person over someone who makes it clear that they are settling for you?

To this end, I often advise job-seekers to avoid negative statements or even negative insinuations about a current employer. It is best to offer neutral (and true) reasons for wanting to move on. Neutral reasons have nothing to do with you or your skills, nor do they reflect negatively on your current firm. Instead, they fall into the "these things happen" category. Here are some examples of neutral reasons for wanting to leave a firm:

Geographic reasons: I want to move to another city to join my family/significant other/move back home etc.;

Practice area reasons: I want to practice law in a city where my practice area is more robust;

Firm size reasons: I would like to join a larger firm where I can attract larger clients;

Loss of work: My firm just lost a major client/practice group, and the loss had nothing to do with me;

Merger: I liked the size and atmosphere of my firm and we just merged;

Personal advancement: Your firm has the best group in my practice field.

Ambition: My firm does not encourage associates to develop business, instead focusing on institutional clients, and I want to develop business because I am entrepreneurial.

If you characterize your firm as being inadequate, it almost always reflects negatively on you. Similarly, if you present yourself as being undervalued, potential employers will ask what is wrong with you that you are being underutilized. Here are examples of reasons that either reflect negatively on you or show that you have a negative view of your current employer, and should be avoided:

I work for an awful /mean/unreasonable partner;

My firm doesn't pay well enough;

I am underappreciated/underutilized/not a go-to person;

My work provider is having an affair with an associate, so I don't get the work I should get (this is a real reason someone told me!);

The clients at my firm are nickel-and-dime, low-level clients, and I want more important work (you can get this point across by simply phrasing this more positively).

Difficult partners, poor bonus years, and office drama are all part of the reality of working in a law firm. Don't be the person who has to have everything a certain way in order to be successful. You won't make a good impression, and you won't get the job offer.

When discussing your current firm, even if you are unhappy, remember always to lead with positive statements. It is obvious to potential employers that if you are looking around, something is missing from your

current firm experience. You don't have to dwell on that. Instead, lead with positive statements like:

"I love the people I work with,";

"I've gotten some great experience at my firm,";

"I've been very lucky to have a high level of responsibility.";

"I worked on one very exciting project where I got to do X,Y,Z."

All of these statements show a potential employer that you are enthusiastic about practicing law, and will bring that enthusiasm to their firm. No one wants to hire someone who is just collecting a paycheck, who is in a downward spiral, or dislikes practicing law.

In sum, always remember to focus on the positive if you want to make a good impression. Praising all the great things about your current firm makes you sound both very professional and polished, as well as sought-after. It is natural to assume that if you are saying positive things about your firm, they have similar feelings about you. By contrast, if you point fingers because someone has treated you unfairly, or you feel that someone is unreasonable, or you are not valued as you feel you should be, it is almost certain that you will be viewed as the problem.

Come up with the most neutral reasons that are true for you for wanting to leave your firm. Try to be the positive, enthusiastic person that an employer can see becoming a part of their firm.