How Can an Attorney or Law Student Find a Job in a Tight Legal Market?

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Summary: How can you achieve your dream job in a tight legal market? Find out in this article.

Question: I am a junior to mid-level attorney thinking of making a lateral move. How do I get my dream job in a law firm, especially in a tight market?

Answer: There is no "magic formula" for getting your dream legal job, as it is dependent upon many individual factors as well as timing and larger economic considerations. But there are things you can do (and refrain from doing) that will maximize your marketability and chance of finding and securing your perfect job. Here are a few:

1. Make Sure You Know What Your Dream Job Is

It is remarkable how this most basic consideration often gets left out of the discussion of attorney career planning and job searching. But it is clearly key to the entire enterprise.

The legal profession is extremely demanding and it takes an enormous amount of time, work, and sacrifice for an attorney to even get to a place where he or she is competitive for the best jobs. Attorneys who are not motivated by something deep and abiding--like passion, purpose, or a sense of calling--often will not have the energy, patience, or fortitude it takes to withstand the long hours, disappointments, and dues-paying required to achieve success.

Additionally, often times attorneys look for jobs because they are generally rundown and unhappy and trying to get away from something they do not like (long hours, inadequate compensation, an overriding feeling of discontent, etc.), as opposed to trying to affirmatively work towards something they know they do want. This is a problem because attorneys who do not have a solid understanding of what they want are susceptible to making hasty or desperate decisions that keep them from attaining the fulfillment they seek.

Similarly, many attorneys often get unduly influenced by factors such as perceived prestige and compensation and end up pursuing opportunities that they are not passionate about, and that are not likely to be attainable or last very long. This is often the case with attorneys who believe that "dream job" is synonymous only with "job in AmLaw firm."

In reality, there are many dream jobs out there, depending on what a given attorney is truly interested in and called to do. These include government jobs (including prosecutors and public defenders at the federal, state, and county level), teaching jobs, public interest jobs, and jobs in tens of thousands of law firms (including solo practices you can start yourself) of various sizes and specialties located in different markets and parts of the country.

For some attorneys, AmLaw firms and top boutiques are perfect fits and something to strive for. But many other attorneys will find greater overall career and life success in smaller or regional firms, or in some cases, outside of law firms altogether.

Some questions to ask yourself in coming up with your dream job are:
What are you passionate about and why did you go to law school in the first place?
Do you feel like you are "called" to do something with your law degree? If so, what?
What motivates you in your professional life? Is it intellectual challenge? Money and/or prestige? The desire to make the world a better place? A love of debate and trial work? An interest in business and helping companies solve problems and be more profitable?
Do you love to research and write? Do you prefer numbers and spreadsheets?
Do you gravitate towards jobs that involve a lot of contact and collaboration with others, or do you generally prefer to complete assignments in a more solitary manner?
What kind of lifestyle do you want overall? Do you thrive in major markets and high-stress environments? Or do you prefer "quality of life" factors that are more easily found in smaller or regional markets with more time to spend on family and personal pursuits?

2. Manage Expectations, Especially Relating to "Credential Weaknesses"

As you begin any job search, it is important to be realistic and manage expectations. Of course, you should "dream big" and not sell yourself short. But at the same time, you want to avoid unrealistic expectations that are likely to lead to disappointment. Getting the perfect job is the result of a myriad of factors that need to come together at the right time and in the right way--including favorable market conditions and good timing--and you have to factor this randomness into your career planning.

Moreover, you need to realize that the legal profession is very conservative and defers to traditional hiring criteria like law school ranking and law school grades. Many firms require transcripts even for partner-level candidates and/or have grade cutoffs to review applications. Others will only look at candidates from top-ranked schools and/or will disregard candidates who are not coming from a certain level of firm.

Fair or not, this is the reality when it comes to legal hiring, so if you have any issues or "credential weaknesses" from your past, it is especially important for you to manage expectations--at least for the short-term--and double-down in your efforts to overcome them.

Credential weaknesses that pose problems with hiring include:
Not having gone to a highly-ranked law school;
Not having gotten good grades in law school;
Not having been a summer associate at a firm;
Not having gotten an offer as a summer associate;
Not having been able to pass the bar;
Not being with a well-regarded law firm right now; and
Having been fired or let go from a job.

It is important to stress that it is possible to move past credential weaknesses so that they become less significant over time. Two great ways are to become an expert in a specialized area of law and/or become a rainmaker.

But at least for the short-term, credential weaknesses will likely haunt you as you look for jobs and you should factor that into your assessment of your dream job.

3. Avoid "Red Flag" Negative Patterns of Behavior

There is a lot that goes into getting a dream job that we cannot necessarily control (timing, economic conditions, credential weaknesses from our pasts), but the good news is that there is a lot we can control. One thing you can control is to refrain--from this day forward--from engaging in negative patterns of behavior that will decrease your marketability because they indicate to employers that you might not be suitable to the practice of law or a good investment of their time.
These patterns of behavior indicate flakiness, lack of commitment, lack of hard work, lack of stability, lack of judgment, and lack of long-term vision. They often manifest in the following "red flags," which you are advised to avoid if at all possible:

Job-hopping (a pattern of leaving firms after relatively short stints);
Leaving a job before having another one is lined up;
Trying to move jobs to make major practice area changes without a very good basis;
Trying to relocate to a market where you have no ties, and where you have not even taken the steps to pass the bar;
Having inappropriate content on the Web; and
Getting fired or asked to leave.

4. Embrace "Green Light" Positive Pattern of Behaviors

As much as you want to avoid the red flag negative patterns of behavior that law firms eschew, you want to do everything in your power to adopt "green light" positive patterns of behavior that law firms embrace.

You want these positive patterns of behavior to radiate out of you and everything that you do!

Here are a few:

Strong work ethic;
Commitment and loyalty towards your employer (even if you are leaving), your practice area, and your profession;
Perseverance and staying power, especially against odds and in the face of difficult circumstances;
Enthusiasm about your career, chance to practice law, and contribute to the bigger picture;
Curiosity about the firm's work, mission, and values--and the people who work there;
Communication, interpersonal, and "soft skills" that indicate your ability to be a team player and get along with supervisors, colleagues, clients, judicial officers, opposing counsel, and others;
Meeting deadlines and being prepared for everything--assignments, meetings, interviews, court appearances--and leaving no stone unturned in making yourself as ready and on-the-ball as you can possibly be;
Having confidence in what you can offer and bring to the table;
Being appreciative for the opportunities you are given; and
Maintaining a polished presence and public persona (including on the Web and social media), as this is a reflection on the esteem in which you hold yourself and those with whom you associate.

5. Work Hard, Develop Expertise, and Document It

If you want to become more marketable, there is no substitute for working hard and putting in the time, energy, and "sweat equity" it takes to develop an expertise in a particular area of law. This can be anything that you feel will sustain your interest and commitment for the long-term--construction litigation, tax policy, healthcare law, private equity funds, data privacy, trademark prosecution, whatever.

It is generally better to be more specialized rather than less. Firms love attorneys who are experts and specialists in niche areas. Firms look at attorneys with specialized expertise as being committed, disciplined, hard-working, useful, and not flaky. Attorneys with expertise can jump in, do substantive work right away, and add to the profitability of the firm.

If you are lucky enough to have a solid understanding of what kind of law you want to practice for the long-term, and are in a firm in which you can work on matters in that practice area, you can increase your marketability--starting today--by putting your head down and plowing through any and all assignments that
come your way and that relate to that practice area. Do not turn down work and do the very best job you can on each assignment. This is the way you can begin to develop the kind of robust and sophisticated practice that will pay-off in the long-term in the form of a dream job.

Moreover, you should document all the great work you are doing on your resume as well as on an accompanying "Representative Matters List" (for litigators) and "Representative Transactions List" (for deal/transactional lawyers). These Lists detail with more specificity than is appropriate for a resume the actual substance of the kinds of deals or litigation matters you have worked on and the kinds of tasks you undertook in regards to them. This shows future employers what you can do--what you have done for others and what you can do for them.

When the time is right and the perfect opportunity comes along, you want to be ready to show all your experience with detailed descriptions of your accomplishments.

For more information on Representative Matters Lists and Representative Transactions Lists, please see How Important Is Having a Representative Transactions or Representative Matters List When Making a Move?

Additional documents also are important--and they should be crisp, clean, substantive, and with no typos. These include your resume, list of references, and writing sample or samples. If you are in a writing-intensive practice area, you may want to consider submitting at least two writing samples. Just make sure there are no errors--as offers have been lost on writing samples that were not up to snuff!

6. Cultivate Connections

We have all heard the saying "It takes a village to raise a child." Well, it also takes a village to get a dream job. Sometimes one of your "connections" will know about the perfect job and be the one to make the call and get you in the door. Other times, you might be working with a partner who decamps to a better firm and, because you have been such a stellar associate, takes you with him or her.

Connections also are invaluable if you are trying to get a job on your own or through a recruiter. All potential employers will contact your references, and the more references you have and the stronger they are, the better.

Typical references include:
Past employers (including judges for whom you clerked);
Current employers (if they know about your job search);
Law profs or clinical instructors;
People you know from professional organizations like the ABA or local bar associations; and
Colleagues with whom you have worked.

You need to always be mindful of the importance of your reputation as an attorney--including with respect to your integrity, work ethic, work product, ability to take directions, and ability to get along with people. If you want to be as marketable as possible, you should strive to preserve and enhance your reputation, and cultivate an expansive array of people who can vouch for you.

7. Enlist the Help of an Expert

When you are ready to make your move, you can maximize your potential for finding your dream job by enlisting the help of a recruiter. Just think of your recruiter as one more connection and one more resource. We are here to help you and we want you to succeed!
A good recruiter can help you produce the most polished package of documents possible for submission to potential dream job employers. A good recruiter also can provide you with many leads on possible perfect job opportunities you may not know about or have thought about.

Furthermore, a good recruiter can act as a cheerleader and support system to help keep you motivated and inspired as you continue on your journey towards your dream job.

8. Believe in Yourself, Your Accomplishments, and What You Have to Offer

The legal profession needs you!

You owe it to yourself (and others who need your help) to make the very most of your education and your law degree. You have worked so hard to get to this point--through college, law school, the bar exam, stressful jobs, and unpleasant situations. But you have to trust that all the hard work is going to pay off. When you ultimately get to the place where you want to be with your career, all the late nights, missed weekends, missed holidays, discouraging outcomes, and daily hurdles of the practice of law will have been worth it.

You just need to keep your eye on the prize and let your passion, purpose, and sense of calling carry you through.

With hard work, commitment, and perseverance--and as much support as possible--your dream job (at least some version of it) is attainable!

See the following articles for more information:
The Most Important Characteristic Attorneys Need to Succeed and Why It Is Almost Impossible for Them to Keep It
The #1 Attorney Career Killer That Attorneys Are Never Taught