The Five Reasons Law Firms and Legal Employers Do Not Hire You After an Interview

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office Managing Director

A law firm cannot survive if it hires improperly. Once someone invites you for an interview, they do not care about your resume. They care about five different issues entirely—and the better you understand these, the better off you will be. Almost always, you get disqualified by one of these five questions that every employer asks themselves about you.

Once someone invites you for an interview, they do not care about your resume. They care about five different issues entirely—and the better you understand these, the better off you will be. Your resume says most of what needs to be said. A legal employer may say after an interview that they are not hiring you because "your experience is not right," but that is rarely true. The reason legal employers do not hire you is almost always because you are disqualified by one of the five questions below that every employer asks themselves about you.

See also:

What Should I Do If I Don't Hear Back After a Good Interview?

The 5 Things Legal Employers Want to Know About You:

1. Will This Attorney Support Me and Have My Back?

Being an attorney is very difficult. The legal world is full of people who continuously question you, tell you that you are not good enough, undermine you, and exclude you. Most attorneys feel very much alone—regardless of who they are. Very few attorneys get into the law school they want to, get interviews with all the law firms they want to, have clients that are pleased with them all the time, are not undermined by peers, are never laid off or fired, or are not humiliated in front of their colleagues. Every attorney has countless insecurities.

It is hard to imagine just how alone and unprotected many attorneys feel. Success is no insulator against feeling alone. The more successful an attorney is, the more likely they are to feel attacked—their primacy challenged both internally by peers and externally by their opponents. Lawyers want more than anything to have other lawyers around them who have their back, but they rarely find this. They want and value this above all else.

If you understand interviewing and practicing law, you will rarely lose a job, not get a job, or have issues getting clients and advancing—if people believe you have their back. People need to believe this earnestly, and you need to deliver.

The employer wants to hire you by the time you are asked to come in for an interview. They hope you will work out and be a good fit. It costs a lot of money and time to interview. However, most employers are not stupid and do not want to make mistakes. The quality of a law firm is measured by the quality of its people. A law firm cannot survive if it hires improperly. The only product a law firm has is its people, and these people will, ultimately, determine what happens with the law firm.
Each interview you get is a significant opportunity. You should never take any interview for granted, and there are a few essential rules you need to understand in order to thrive in interviews. Most attorneys do not get these rules right. Following these rules is the key to success—not only when interviewing but also in the practice of law.

There are many attorneys, law students, and others who get just about every job they interview for, and there are those who rarely get jobs. The number one characteristic of the people who get the most jobs is that they seem like they will support the interviewer. People who do not get jobs come across as people who will not help their interviewers.

See also:

Can You Be Trusted? Why Credibility is One of the Most Important Characteristics of the Most Successful Attorneys

What does it mean to support the interviewer?
Most people have all manner of insecurities. The socially inept nerd may know how people see them. The attorney with great looks and social skills may be lacking in intellect or credentials. The well-known and successful attorney may have some scandals in their background. The short attorney may be self-conscious about their height, the skinny attorney about their weight. You get the idea. Everyone has insecurities. We all want to be accepted, loved, and cared about; however, at the same time, the world is a tough place, and very few of us get this. Accordingly, we desperately look for people who we believe will support us, see the good in us, and make us feel like the people we perceive ourselves to be. We want people to see the best sides of ourselves.

You will succeed in interviews, get jobs, and do well in life when you come across as someone who will support your interviewers and not someone who is looking for support. People want to hire those they believe will support and protect them. Employers do not want to hire anyone they think will not help and defend them. Law firms want to hire candidates with whom they feel comfortable. They do not want to hire anyone who makes them feel uncomfortable. Your success and ability to do well in the practice of law and get positions will be due to how much it seems like you can support your interviewer.

The great hope of everyone interviewing you is that you will be their champion and help them look good. Partners want to hire partners who will work with them and collaborate with them as well. People want to have others on their side—getting tasks done for them, protecting their interests, and having their backs all the time. These sorts of people are challenging to find. More often, people are not loyal, are more out for themselves, and are against us. We never know who we can trust. Most employers that are interviewing you (and the people inside of them) desperately want to find people they can trust and who will have their backs. Unfortunately, these people are often next to impossible to find.

When I started my first legal job, I was less than a few months into it and asked to do an assignment for a notoriously difficult partner. A midlevel associate helped me with it. When I told her I did not understand the task, she launched into a mini diatribe about how difficult it was to work with the partner. She told me I needed to “cover my back” and “write down and document everything” because the partner I was working for could not be trusted.

At some point, she reached into her laptop bag and opened a document on her laptop. It listed all of the slights, imagined slights, and more she had received during her time at the firm. She had documented and written down everything wrong that had ever been said to her—every rumor, innuendo, and other things that happened to her in the firm. She was a Harvard Law school graduate, but at the same time, not considered to
be good at her job. A few months after this, she left the firm after making a catastrophic error on an assignment.

See also:

People Around You Can Shape What Happens to You: Avoid the Negative Affirmations of Others

I have no idea whether or not the woman should have been writing down everything that happened to her at the firm. What I do know, though, is that in my time practicing law and witnessing attorneys, I have noticed that when it comes to getting jobs and keeping jobs, most employers want to avoid people who are against them. This woman was against the firm and the partner. She had no allies and ended up doing something different with her career. She was not part of the "herd" of people she was working for and not a supporter of the firm. She had no allies in the firm and was not an ally of anyone in the firm.

I have made interpersonal mistakes in my career and life that showed I did not support the people I was around.

One time I was working as a valet at a country club. One busy evening, a more senior valet asked me what I thought of my boss. I told her I had some issues with him because he had made me empty my pockets and give him all my tips a few times, and I did not think that was fair. The next morning he called my mother and told her that I was "fired" for talking behind his back. The woman went straight to him with my complaint. He fired me because he realized that I was talking behind his back and not supporting him. There were plenty of people out there who would be happy to replace me.

When I was older, I worked for a female partner while the husband also worked in the law firm as a partner. I was working on a challenging assignment of international law. The woman had recently been made a nonequity partner by the law firm and was on her way out. She was not putting much time into the firm. The issue was like a complex games section on the LSAT involving all sorts of shell companies and other misdirections. It took me over a week to understand it. When I tried to explain it to this partner repeatedly, I realized she could not understand it, and I got frustrated. She became angry with me.

She asked her husband to review my memo. He was brilliant, and he picked up what was going on within a few hours. We all sat down and tried to explain it to her, but she still could not understand it. She was very embarrassed by this and could have understood it if she was more focused. Due to this, she became angry with me, and I realized that I had an enemy in the firm, even though I had done an excellent job on the assignment. I made the horrifying error of explaining to the woman's husband that she did not understand the issue—I was right, but this was a colossal error.

Many people believe that because they are qualified for a position, the employer should hire them. Employers do not hire people just because they are qualified. Every interview is a process in which the employer is trying to figure out if you have their back, and whether they believe you will support them or undermine them. The individuals interviewing you feel this way as well.

Associates interviewing you want people who will make them look good—not the other way around.

Partners interviewing you also want associates and other partners who will support them. Everyone, everywhere, needs desperately to be supported.

I believe that one of the youngest and most successful partners got that way because of how he grew up. He grew up in a bad neighborhood where, from a young age, he was a gang member. As a member of a gang, he told me, he learned from an early age the importance of loyalty to every member of the gang. Everyone
looked out for one another and protected one another. They were taught the importance of loyalty and not undermining one another.

When this attorney got older and joined a law firm, he displayed the same level of commitment to his peers and his clients, so he did well. In particular, he learned not to fight about who got credit for what. In most law firms, partners will spend a lot of time jockeying for the highest compensation and who gets credit for bringing in a particular client. This attorney instinctively felt that being part of this sort of “rat nest” would not do him any good. He became happy to share origination credit. He also did whatever he could to see his clients’ point of view and have their back, and they rewarded this by giving him more work and not pushing back when he raised his rates.

When you are interviewing with anyone, they are trying to figure out if you are the sort of person who is going to support them or not. Interviewers want to hire people they believe will see their point of view and protect them. Most never find this, but a few do. If you learn the skill of seeing things from the individual interviewer’s perspective and giving them the impression you will protect them and see the world from their point of view, they will want to bring you on. They want to believe you will support them.

Years ago, I interviewed someone for a position for a judge. This person was the top choice for the job before the interview. This person was doing exceptionally well in their interviews but had read reviews about the judge before coming into the interview, and a few of them were less than favorable.

Anyone in the public limelight like a judge, powerful attorney, or politician will have negative things written about them from time to time. People attack powerful people for a variety of reasons. Influential people may upset others because they challenge others’ self-worth, upset the status quo, or made enemies by taking sides against people or groups. Whatever the reason, no influential person or successful organization is without enemies.

The person was very close to being hired when they started asking me about the negative comments about the judge and how I justified these. I was very quick to defend the judge and informed the judge about this. The person would have gotten the job if not for this mistake. Their comments and questions showed they might not be able to commit to the judge’s point of view. The way they asked the question gave the impression that they believed in it, and it was difficult for them.

See also:

21 Major Job Interview Mistakes to Avoid at All Costs

I interview people all the time who eliminate themselves from jobs by appearing too guarded, not likely to defend me, and a potential problem. I find this process so contrary to getting work done and being effective that I purposefully like to avoid working in large offices that contain a series of continually evolving cycles of alliances and more. I prefer to have people close to me whom I trust, have my back, and rely on--and not the other way around. Everyone wants to be supported, and every interviewer is looking for this.

How do you show an interviewer that you will support them?

Some of the best people I have interviewed in the past have done an exceptional job showing they will be supporters, even if their ultimate performance on the job demonstrated otherwise.

One man I interviewed once for a position came in with a business plan for the company and told me how much he wanted to work there, and the improvements he would immediately make.
Another person came in for an interview and told me about several things I had written that they liked and how they would recommend using this to help people looking for and underutilizing this.

Other people have shown up for interviews and just clearly seemed to like me a lot and want to help and learn. They smiled, talked about how they were interested in working hard, and seemed to like and respect me. They made me feel important.

If your interviewer thinks you like them, and they believe they can trust you, that will go a long way towards getting a position.

Making an employer think you like them is incredibly important. Many attorneys that have a difficult time getting positions do not connect with their interviewers. Their interviews do not feel well-liked. The interviewer sits there speaking with the person and cannot get a sense of whether or not the person speaking with them likes them.

See also:

The Importance of Attorneys Being Well-Liked in their Jobs: Why Others Must Like You for You to Get Ahead

You need to do what you can to genuinely connect with the person interviewing you, be likable, and like the interviewer. Interviewers want people who see their point of view and make them feel like they have their back and the employer's back. They are looking for signals that show this. They do not want to hire people who are going to cause trouble. They want to hire people who are stress-free and will support them.

People are tribal animals. When they come together, they tend to have shared interests and backgrounds. Lawyers hire others who are like them by looking for commonalities and bonds that are likely to show mutual support. These can be things like growing up in the same area, having people in common, shared schools, shared interests, shared backgrounds, and more. The more you can identify and find commonalities with your interviewers, the better off you will be. Groups come together against a relatively hostile outside world. Your interviewer wants someone who has their back.

Early in my career, I was interviewing for a bookkeeper to work with me. Since I was young, I have watched the most successful entrepreneurs and lawyers closely with their firms. I noticed that the most successful ones almost always had bookkeepers close to them who had worked for them for a long time. I did not understand why this was; however, I knew there must be something to the level of trust between the two people and the necessity of managing money as carefully as possible for success. Because I realized this was so important, I made sure that I prioritized hiring someone close to me who I could trust.

After countless interviews, the person I ultimately hired was someone who had worked for her previous employer some 20 years before he had sold his business. I realized she must have had his back if she worked for him that long. She showed up at her interview smiling, happy, and talked about how she had helped her previous boss, had his back, and intimated she would do the same for me. I hired her. She ended up working for me for over a decade and did an excellent job.

When someone has our back, we want to keep them around or hire them. You need to give the person who hires you and is interviewing you the idea you will have their back. If they believe this, they will hire you if they can.

It is never about you. Getting hired is about whether the employer believes you will have their back and their employees' backs.
Employers are looking for clues to see if you will not have their back and ask:

Will this person talk negatively about me, and others in the firm?
Will this person be unhappy with their compensation or hours?
Will this person do what it takes when things get difficult?
Will this person stick around and not look for a job if there are problems?

Employers are probing, judging, and doing everything they can to figure out if you will have their back.

Society is an incredibly polarizing place. You only need to see how seriously people of political parties take their stances, how various angry groups behave toward each other, and the general unease between rich and poor, black and white, democrat and republican, and so on. People feel unsafe and want to hire people that make who feel safe.

2. Does This Attorney Genuinely Want the Job and Want to Work Here?
After working for a judge and two law firms, I was trying to decide whether I wanted to practice law anymore and was going out on interviews with law firms. I certainly did not get a position with every law firm I interviewed with. In fact, my batting average was quite low. I was usually able to muster up and do very well in screening interviews. Beyond that, smart law firms, after several interviews, would not offer me a job.

One very well-known and smart attorney told me he could tell I did not want the job.

He was right.

It is challenging to fool your way into getting a job if you do not want it. Smart law firms, in particular, can generally tell you do not want to work for them (or any law firm) based on the choices you have made with your career if you are a practicing attorney. For example, attorneys do things like go work in companies, move firms for inexplicable reasons, change practice areas, take a lot of time off, and do other things that show they probably do not want to work in a law firm. Other people show up at interviews and have a sense of indifference to their work. They may have preconceptions about the employer, the type of work, or the practice setting. If you come across as not wanting the job, the odds of the employer being interested in you are very low.

I interview people for positions all the time, and people who work for me do as well.

The other day a woman who works for me was interviewing a clerical person for a job. When asked about some aspects of her experience, the woman replied: "You can see it on my resume." This young person did not want the job.

I regularly interview people to work as placement professionals at BCG Attorney Search. It is challenging to get a job at our firm. I would estimate I interview less than 1 in 100 applicants and hire less than 1 in 10 people I ultimately interview. I hire so few people because the people I interview do not know enough about the job to see if interests them. There is plenty of information on our website about what we do, but very few people bother to review and read it when applying to positions. Because they show up not knowing what we do, it often comes across that they do not want the job, and the interviews stop there.

People who do well in interviews (and after being hired) want the job. It is like this with all employers.
These people show up for interviews, are prepared by knowing about the employer, make the employer feel unique, and express an interest in working for the employer. The employer needs to pick up on the fact that you want to work for them—not just because you want to make a high salary, they are prestigious, or you need a job, but because there is something special and unique about the employer makes you like them.

See also:

The Best Way to Prepare for a Job Search and Interviews

My mother likes to tell the story about when I was younger and picking a puppy to take home. We went to a house with a huge litter of puppies, and they all looked the same. One of these puppies came up to me and would not stop kissing me and jumping on my lap. That was the puppy I chose.

When I was in my first year of law school, I was single, and one day a woman walked up to me and told me she had been admiring me from a distance for some time and asked why I had never spoken with her. She told me all the times she had seen me, and I had walked right by her and ignored her. I did not remember any of those times, but she did. She was my type, and I was flattered. Six months later we were living together, and a few years after that we were married. She genuinely liked me and saw something in me.

Employers are like this too. When we genuinely like them and want to work for them, they are more likely to hire us than if we do not. Our enthusiasm for a particular employer is something that makes us rise above the crowd of other applicants. If we know about the employer and who they are and what they stand for, they are much more likely to hire us that if we do not.

Think about the history of your relationships. When someone wants us and wants to be close to us, we are often much more likely to reciprocate than if they do not. When people have all sorts of doubts about us, if we are psychologically healthy we probably will avoid them.

When interviewing with legal employers, you need to show them that you are interested in them and want the job. You do this through preparation and looking the part. You do this by having enthusiasm and connecting with the employer.

Employers are like people. They have all sorts of insecurities. They may be insecure about their size, prestige level, the quality of their attorneys, the type of clients they represent, the mistakes made in the past, their pay, finances, offices, and the like. Some legal employers need more validation than others. The largest source of validation, however, is when an employer feels that we like them individually, want to work for them, and have concrete reasons for doing so.

When someone sees the best in us and wants to be there for us, we are much more likely to want them. People who want to work somewhere always do much better than those who do not.

I have encountered attorneys who seemingly have their pick of places to work--attorneys with a big book of business, who graduated from the best law schools, with the right experience in the right practice area. These attorneys can get interviews with all sorts of law firms, but show up and act recalcitrant--like they do not want the position. They do not get hired.

You need to come across as someone who wants the job. That does not mean you act desperate, but you need to seem like someone who wants to be with the employer and likes them.

See also:
Your Interviewing Personality

3. Will This Attorney Do the Job the Way We Need and Expect It to Be Done?
Regardless of the type of position you are interviewing for, the employer is asking themselves if you can do the job the way they want.

In most cases, if the employer is bringing you in for interviews, they already know you can do the job. However, the employer still needs to see if you can do the job in the way they expect it done. Many interviews go sideways, and attorneys disqualify themselves by blowing this one.

Attorneys, law students, and others blow this by setting limits about how they will and will not work--right in the interviews!

One of the most significant examples of how attorneys blow this is by expressing the need to work in the setting of their choosing or report to work when they want to.

Most law firm partners work in the office. They want to hire others to work with them in the office to keep them company, be a presence, be available to stop by the office and get feedback or assignments, and, in general, to make them feel important. I hate to be the bearer of this news, but it is true. Most lawyers in authority roles want to have people around them, which goes back to the need to feel supported. Most people have families at home that underpin them, and they want "families" at work.

Many attorneys in interviews will express a desire to work at home one or more days per week, to leave work early, and other similar requests. While in practice there is nothing wrong with this, the reality of most legal environments is that assignments and work are coming up all the time, and no one knows when there will be a lot of work. Many law firms do want face time, and the people working for you expect this. If they feel that you are going to set limits on your office time and availability, they will simply hire someone else.

Another way attorneys talk themselves out of jobs is by telling the employer how the work should be performed in interviews.

I was once working with a company seeking to hire an attorney to do all of its litigation. The company wanted to hire someone who would do trials, hire some junior attorneys to do the briefing, and did not want to use law firms. That was their requirement, and they wanted to do this because they felt they had wasted money hiring law firms in the past. I found many suitable applicants for the company and explained this--but many of the attorneys interviewing for the position had their thoughts. Partners from major law firms that interviewed for the job wanted to "manage" the litigation and believed that the best way to do the work was to have other law firms do all of the work. They did not want to do the job. They saw going in-house as a chance to escape the demands of a law firm.

One of the challenges of working in the legal placement business is hiring people who will do the job the way I want it done. Legal placement is a difficult job that requires people to follow a specific process. You need to review new jobs each morning. You need to research employers that could be good fits. You need to position people in a certain way. You need to understand attorneys properly and have their back. You need to produce a certain quality of work. Our company has specific standards and methods of doing work.

We have ways of performing that work. Only a few times in our history have we ever hired someone with experience working as a legal recruiter elsewhere. When we have, it has rarely worked. The reason it did not work is that they pick up bad habits and working ways that are incompatible with how we work. Accordingly, they do poorly. The only people who thrive are typically those without experience who are willing to do the
job the way we need it done.

Legal employers want to hire people who will do things their way, and are not set in their ways or highly opinionated about how a job should be done. If you look like you will not follow directions, or have your own opinions about something that contradicts that of the employer, this typically does not go over all that well in interviews.

Associates often talk themselves out of jobs by being highly opinionated about what type of work is necessary and what is not. They may state that they hate going on client dinners, do not want to travel for work, and think committees and other firm activities are a waste of time. An attorney will often reveal aspects of themselves that the interviewer realizes are likely to make them unwilling to do the job the way the firm wants.

You will often reveal your preferences and biases in the questions you ask as well. Many attorneys will ask questions that show they have specific ways of doing work incompatible with the firm's standards or operating methods. They may talk about their reasons for leaving a firm due to how their firm does work and why they do not like it.

See also:

What it's Really Like as an In-House Attorney: Don’t believe Everything You've heard

The 'Dark Side' of Going In-house

4. Will This Attorney Make Us Look Good and Do they Represent How We Want to See Ourselves?

You can get in the door with most employers if your resume is good enough. However, no one will hire you if they think you will not make them look the way they want to see themselves.

How you dress, how you speak, how you carry yourself, and other traits reflect whether you will make the employer look good. Some people show up for interviews and act awkwardly, speak inappropriately, or make all sorts of mistakes that show that they will make the employer look bad. These sorts of people do not get hired.

Not too long ago, I interviewed someone amazing on paper, but who smelled like smoke so badly my eyes watered during the interview. The woman was also coughing phlegm into a tissue during the meeting. I did not hire her. I did not want her representing me in the marketplace.

I interviewed someone qualified for another position, but they had tattoos all over their hands and up to their chin. I did not think he would make me look good. I did not hire him.

Several years ago, I interviewed a highly-qualified person for a job. Before the interview, he asked to use the bathroom right next to my office. I thought the interview went well, but after he left, I walked in the bathroom and noticed he had peed all over the seat. I did not hire him.

How you talk, your confidence, and mannerisms during an interview are crucial. Your grooming and appearance matter as well.

I once represented a guy who graduated first in his law school class who was getting tons of interviews, but it stopped. He had very long hair down to his hips and refused to cut it. The prestigious law firms he wanted to work at did not like this.
I was representing a very highly qualified attorney a few years ago who had lost his position and needed a new one. When I was speaking with him, he talked about how depressed he was and how his father had committed suicide when he was his age. He went into his interviews and came across as very low-energy and sad. He did not get hired.

Law firms that are interviewing you see you as a representative and someone who should publicly reflect how the firm wants to see itself. The way you look, talk and act all are reflective of this. Ideally, you should understand the part you are interviewing for and come across appropriately.

Think about what you would expect out of an attorney representing you. How would you want them to look, act, and come across? You need to look and act the part. You are a representative of someone else. To some extent, you need to suppress your individuality and how you appear publicly.

At some point during your interviews, if they have not already done so, your interviewers will start looking up your social media profiles and learning about you as a person—whether you want them to or not. What they find in this investigation will determine their interest in you—or lack thereof. If you look like you have extreme politics, or might play a little too hard, they may not like this.

See also:

What to Wear to a Lunch Interview With a Law Firm

How Important Are Intelligence, Work Ethic, Perseverance, and Social Intelligence to Succeeding in Large Law Firms?

5. Do I Like This Attorney More Than the Other People I Am Interviewing?

To get the position, you need to be the first choice among the people interviewing for the same position—not an easy thing to do. Employers are going to make this determination, for the most part, based on how well you do the other four items above. Regardless of the time you go into an interview, the employer may have already mostly made up their mind about the person they want to hire, and you may be at a distinct disadvantage. What this means is that you are going to need to be the most likable.

Likability is personal and nothing you can always control. One-third of the people we meet automatically will not like us; one-third will not care either way, and the other third will like us. To get job offers, you need to do what you can to be the most likable and realize that you have many competitors.

One of the most important aspects of being likable is understating what you say about yourself. Your resume talks about your achievements. Being understated and acting like you will not seek to get credit for everything will help you a great deal. People do not like others who talk too much about their achievements in person.

You also need to do what you can to look human. You can talk about your children, your hobbies and even, to some extent, mistakes and regrets you have—provided they show mobility upward. You can talk about how you are trying to improve and develop yourself. You can, in short, look human.

People desperately want to connect with others, and very few people can. People like whomever they connect with the most.

Part of connecting is to allow people to talk about themselves. You can get people to talk about themselves and what is attractive to them in a whole slew of different ways. When you direct conversations to topics people are interested in and make them feel good about themselves, they are more likely to like you than
when you do not. When you ask questions that make them feel defensive, they do not.

As a general rule, when I am speaking with people whose favor I need, I try and get them to talk at least 70 to 80% of the time. When I am doing the most speaking and trying to persuade them to my point of view, I find they like me less and are far less likely to be convinced.

The most successful people I know are the best listeners and ask the best questions. The best interviewers are the best listeners, asking the best questions that allow them to talk favorably about themselves. The most exciting person to all of us is ourselves.

You will be most likely to get jobs when people like you the best. Getting a position is more about being likable than anything else.

See also:

How to Answer the "Tell Me about Yourself" Interview Question

Employers Want to Hire You

Do Not Be Controlled By Your Need to Feel Significant