

What Hiring Managers Want: Insider's Tips to Secure Your Ideal Legal Position

By *Angelie Ala* from *Los Angeles Office*

SUMMARY:

This article provides insider tips on ace legal job interviews and stands out as a competitive candidate. It emphasizes the importance of researching the firm's values, understanding its culture, evaluating the work-life balance, and assessing alignment with your values. It also provides an example of a response to the question, "Why do you want to work here?" demonstrating your understanding of the firm's culture and commitment. These tips will equip you with the knowledge necessary to impress hiring managers and pave the way for a successful legal career.

QUESTIONS ANSWERED IN THIS ARTICLE

1. What values should I look for in a law firm?

When looking for a law firm, consider the firm's values, work environment, and style. Look for clues during your interactions with the firm to understand their culture, such as competitive or collaborative, formal or relaxed. Additionally, evaluate the work-life balance and assess alignment with your values to ensure you find a firm that is a good fit for you.

2. What should I say when asked why I want to work at a law firm?

When asked why you want to work at the law firm, express your understanding of their culture and how it aligns with your values. Demonstrate your understanding of the firm's values, work environment, style, and professional interests and goals that align with the firm. Show them that you are not just looking for any job but precisely a position with their firm.

3. What sets me apart from other legal job applicants?

To set yourself apart from other legal job applicants, conduct diligent research on the firm and its culture, demonstrate your understanding of their work environment and values, and show how you align with them. Additionally, tailor your approach to each hiring manager by responding thoughtfully to questions.

4. How can I make sure I find a law firm that is a good fit?

To ensure you find a law firm that is a good fit, evaluate the work-life balance and assess alignment with your values. Additionally, look for clues in your interactions with the firm to understand their culture and whether it is competitive or collaborative, formal or relaxed.

5. What advice would you give someone looking for a legal job?

When looking for a legal job, keep updated on the market trends and hone your skills. Additionally, build meaningful relationships and be prepared to demonstrate an understanding of the hiring manager's expectations. Lastly, tailor your approach to each firm by responding thoughtfully to questions and demonstrating how you align with their values. This approach will set you apart from other legal job applicants.

In the fiercely competitive world of legal recruitment, a deep understanding of what hiring managers seek can be the difference between securing your ideal position and falling short. Unraveling the intricate dynamics of the hiring process can often feel like an impossible challenge, especially when each law firm has its own unique set of expectations and requirements.

If you're a law student or practicing attorney seeking your next big opportunity, this article will provide key

insights to stand out. We'll examine insider tips, interesting facts, and figures about top law firms, providing you with the tools to optimize your career trajectory.

Know the Firm Inside and Out

Thoroughly understanding the firm you're applying to is not only beneficial--it's expected. This understanding can impact everything from your application to the interview, demonstrating your preparedness and genuine interest. Here's how you can master this:

Research Practice Areas:

Review the firm's website.

Look at the kind of cases they handle.

Understand the areas of law they specialize in.

For example, [Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz](#) is renowned for their involvement in some of the biggest corporate mergers, advising on deals worth over \$400 billion in 2022 alone. Understanding this will allow you to highlight relevant experiences in your application and discuss how your skills would contribute to the firm's already sterling reputation in the field.

Identify Key Partners: Understand who the key players are in the firm. This includes partners, heads of departments, or anyone who plays a critical role in the company. For example, knowing that David Polk & Wardwell's Thomas J. Reid is considered one of the top M&A lawyers can help you craft interview responses that indicate your awareness of the firm's leadership.

Investigate Notable Cases: Research high-profile cases the firm has handled. This demonstrates your knowledge of the firm's work and legal prowess. For instance, if you're applying to Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan, it would be valuable to know that they represented Samsung in the high-stakes patent war with Apple, highlighting their expertise in intellectual property law.

Understand the Firm's Culture: Look beyond just the work. [Consider what the firm stands for](#), its values, [work-life balance](#), professional development opportunities, and community involvement. For instance, if you're applying to White & Case, knowing their commitment to pro bono work (with over 120,000 hours dedicated in 2022) and demonstrating a similar commitment could significantly boost your chances.

Scenario: Let's say you're applying to a law firm like Sullivan & Cromwell, known for its financial services and corporate law expertise. During your interview, you're asked, "Why do you want to work with us?" Instead of giving a generic response, you say, "Having closely followed Sullivan & Cromwell's pivotal role in advising on complex financial transactions, like the \$13.5 billion acquisition of Refinitiv by the London Stock Exchange in 2021, I'm drawn to the high-stakes, intricate work the firm does. I am excited by the prospect of working under accomplished partners like H. Rodgin Cohen, renowned for his role in banking regulation. Also, I greatly admire the firm's commitment to mentorship programs, which aligns with my desire for continual professional growth."

This response shows that you've thoroughly researched the firm's work, people, and values, positioning you as a strong, invested candidate.

Highlight Relevant Skills and Experiences

Law firms are in the business of problem-solving and need lawyers who can bring a varied skill set to the table. Here's how to showcase the skills and experiences that will make you an attractive hire:

Showcase Legal Skills: Include specific examples of when you've used legal research, analysis, negotiation, or drafting skills. For instance, if you interned at a legal aid clinic and helped draft pleadings or conduct client interviews, this hands-on experience would be valuable to a firm like [Morgan, Lewis & Bockius](#), which handled over 1,600 pro bono matters in 2022.

Highlight Transferable Skills: Emphasize transferable skills from your previous roles, such as critical thinking, project management, or communication skills. For instance, if you're applying to a firm like Allen & Overy, known for its complex cross-border transactions, showcasing your experience managing multiple tasks under strict deadlines could be an asset.

Include Technological Proficiency: As the legal sector increasingly embraces digital tools, showing your technological proficiency can be a boon. If you're comfortable with e-discovery tools, legal research software, or even AI-based contract analysis tools, highlight this. Firms like Baker McKenzie, with its innovative tech solutions like the AI-based due diligence tool 'Luminance,' value such skills.

Detail any Language Skills: If the firm you're applying to operates internationally, additional language skills can be a significant advantage. For example, if you're applying to a global law firm like Clifford Chance and can converse fluently in Mandarin, it could be particularly useful given their extensive operations in Asia.

Scenario: In an interview for a position at Debevoise & Plimpton, you're asked, "Tell me about your legal experiences and the skills you've developed." You might respond, "During my summer associate role at XYZ firm, I honed my legal research and analysis skills, specifically within corporate law. I assisted in drafting several merger agreements, which also enhanced my understanding of deal structures and contract language. Beyond these technical skills, I built strong relationships with clients and fellow associates, demonstrating my ability to communicate effectively and work collaboratively. Moreover, being bilingual in English and Spanish, I was often called upon to assist with our Spanish-speaking clients, an experience I believe would be beneficial at a global firm like Debevoise & Plimpton."

By highlighting your experiences and skills relevant to the firm and the role, you demonstrate your potential value as a member of their team.

Show Your Adaptability

In a fast-evolving legal landscape, being adaptable is a critical trait law firms look for. Demonstrating this ability can set you apart from other candidates. Here are some ways you can showcase your adaptability:

Highlight Learning Experiences: Demonstrate instances where you've had to learn new concepts or processes quickly. For example, you could discuss how you mastered a new legal research tool during an internship or adapted to virtual court proceedings during the pandemic. If you're applying to a tech-forward firm like Hogan Lovells, showcasing such adaptability to digital trends can be a strong selling point.

Discuss Diverse Experiences: If you've worked in different legal areas or industries, emphasize how these experiences helped you adapt to varying requirements and dynamics. Such diverse experiences would be particularly valuable for multidisciplinary firms like King & Spalding, where various practice areas coexist. **Showcase International Experience:** If you've had the opportunity to study or work in different countries, it could demonstrate your ability to adapt to different cultures and legal systems. This would be beneficial when applying to a global firm like Norton Rose Fulbright, with offices in more than 50 cities worldwide.

Scenario: During an interview with a law firm like Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, you're asked about your adaptability skills. A possible response could be, "In my previous role at a boutique law firm, we often had to adapt to changing client needs and legal landscapes. For instance, when one of our main clients expanded its operations to Brazil, I quickly familiarized myself with Brazilian business law to provide accurate advice. Additionally, during the transition to remote work due to COVID-19, I took the initiative to learn and eventually train my team on virtual collaboration tools to ensure seamless coordination. This adaptability extends to my ability to handle different practice areas, as evidenced by my experience in both corporate and intellectual property law."

A response like this will demonstrate to hiring managers that you can adapt to new situations and be

proactive in addressing challenges, making you a valuable addition to their team.

Demonstrate Long-Term Commitment

Law firms invest considerable resources in their attorneys, so demonstrating a commitment to staying with the firm for an extended period can be a significant advantage. Here are some tips to effectively convey this:

Emphasize Professional Development Goals: Mention your aspirations that align with what the firm offers regarding professional development. This could be specific training programs, mentorship opportunities, or clear advancement pathways. For instance, your eagerness to grow and learn can highlight your commitment to a firm like Sidley Austin, known for its comprehensive training programs.

Speak about Firm-Specific Interests: Show that your interests align with the firm's specialties or culture. If you're applying to a firm like Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, and have a passion for social justice, emphasize how their pro bono work aligns with your interests.

Discuss Future Goals: Explain where you see yourself in the future and how the firm fits into those plans. This could involve specific practice areas you wish to specialize in or leadership roles you aim to hold.

Scenario: During an interview with a firm like WilmerHale, known for its focus on securities law and litigation, you're asked, "Where do you see yourself in five years?" A good response could be, "In five years, I see myself as a valued associate at WilmerHale, having specialized further in securities law. Given the firm's prominence in this field and its range of high-profile cases, I believe this is the best place to grow my career. I'm also attracted by the firm's commitment to professional development and look forward to contributing my skills and learning from the expertise within the firm over the long term."

Demonstrating long-term commitment in this way assures hiring managers that you're not just looking for a stepping stone but are genuinely invested in contributing to the firm's success.

Be Genuine and Authentic

Authenticity creates trust, and trust is crucial in any professional relationship, especially in the legal field. Here's how you can showcase your authenticity:

Be Honest About Your Strengths and Weaknesses: No one is perfect. A willingness to recognize and work on your weaknesses can indicate maturity and honesty. For example, if your strength lies in detailed legal research but you must improve public speaking, be upfront about it. Firms like Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom appreciate such honesty and provide resources for their associates to improve their skills.

Discuss Personal Passions: Talk about what truly interests you, whether related to law or not. This can provide a glimpse of your personality outside work. For instance, if you have a passion for environmental activism, mentioning it during your application to a firm like Squire Patton Boggs, known for its environmental law practice, could highlight a meaningful connection.

Stay True to Your Values: Be clear about your values and how they align with the firm's. Firms like Cravath, Swaine & Moore, known for their commitment to legal excellence and professional development, would value candidates with similar principles.

Scenario: During an interview with a firm like Shearman & Sterling, you're asked, "What are your weaknesses?" A thoughtful answer might be, "One area I'm consciously working on is my public speaking skills. While my strengths lie in legal research and writing, I realize that effective public speaking is crucial in a courtroom setting, so I've been taking initiatives to improve, such as joining a local Toastmasters club. On the other hand, one of my key strengths is my perseverance. During law school, I balanced a demanding academic schedule with part-time work and volunteering, which taught me resilience and effective time management."

Such a response shows you are self-aware, authentic, and willing to improve, traits that any law firm would value in a potential hire. Remember, authenticity can't be faked, and trying to be someone you're not can lead to dissatisfaction for both you and the firm in the long run. Be yourself, and you're more likely to find a firm that fits you well.

Master the Art of Networking

Networking is an essential part of building your legal career. The relationships you foster can provide opportunities, advice, and support throughout your career. Here's how you can master this art:

Participate in Legal Events and Associations: Engage in law-related events, seminars, and professional associations, such as the American Bar Association or local law societies. Attending events hosted by firms like Latham & Watkins, which regularly conducts webcasts on various legal topics, can provide opportunities to meet professionals and display your interest in specific legal fields.

Connect with Alumni: Your law school's alumni network can be a valuable resource. Connecting with alumni who work at your target firms can provide insights into the firm's culture, work, and hiring process.

Leverage Online Networking: Use platforms like LinkedIn to connect with legal professionals. Be active, share relevant content, and participate in discussions.

Build Genuine Relationships: Networking isn't just about collecting contacts. Aim to build meaningful relationships by showing genuine interest in others and offering help when possible. This long-term approach will yield better results.

Scenario: Imagine you're attending a legal seminar where a partner from Jones Day is one of the speakers. You're interested in working at Jones Day due to their leading M&A practice. After the seminar, you approach the partner and say, "Your presentation on recent trends in M&A was insightful. I'm particularly interested in the impact of technology on M&A strategies, a topic I recently wrote a paper on during my final year at law school. I'm keen on learning more about this field and would appreciate any advice you could give to a recent graduate like me."

This approach not only shows your interest and knowledge in a relevant area but also opens a conversation in a non-intrusive manner, making it an effective networking strategy. Follow up on such interactions, thanking them for their time and expressing interest in staying connected.

Showcase Your Teamwork and Leadership Skills

Law firms thrive on teamwork, and leadership skills are a valuable asset for any potential hire. Showcasing these skills effectively can set you apart from other candidates. Here's how:

Demonstrate Teamwork in Previous Roles: Detail experiences where you've worked effectively. This could be in previous jobs, internships, or even academic projects. If you're applying to a collaborative firm like Linklaters, showing your ability to work well in a team is crucial.

Highlight Leadership Experiences: Discuss roles where you've had to lead or manage others. This could range from leading a project at work to serving as president of your law school's moot court board. Firms like Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, known for their leadership in high-stakes litigation, value such experiences.

Talk About Conflict Resolution: Provide examples of when you've effectively handled disagreements or conflicts within a team. This will display your ability to maintain harmony and productivity despite challenges.

Scenario: During an interview at a firm like Kirkland & Ellis, you're asked to discuss a situation where you demonstrated leadership. A possible response could be, "During my internship at XYZ firm, I was allowed to

lead a team responsible for the due diligence process for a potential merger. It was a demanding task with a tight deadline, and initially, there were disagreements within the team regarding the allocation of tasks. I stepped in to facilitate a discussion where everyone could voice their concerns. We then collectively decided on a task distribution strategy that everyone agreed on. As a result, not only did we complete the assignment on time, but we also improved our communication and team cohesion."

Such a response shows that you can step into a leadership role, manage conflicts, and facilitate effective teamwork, all of which are important in a collaborative work environment like a law firm.

Pay Attention to the 'Fit'

Every law firm has a unique culture, and finding one where you 'fit' can significantly impact your job satisfaction and performance. Here are some pointers on evaluating your fit with a potential firm:

Understand the Firm's Culture: Research the firm's values, work environment, and style. Is it competitive or collaborative? Formal or relaxed? Large firms like DLA Piper might have a different work culture than smaller boutique firms. Look for clues during your interactions with the firm and ask questions about the work environment.

Evaluate the Work-Life Balance: Consider the balance between professional demands and the personal life the firm encourages. Some firms, like Baker Botts, have supported a healthy work-life balance, which may align with your personal needs.

Assess Alignment with Your Values: Does the firm's values align with yours? If diversity and inclusion are important to you, a firm like Covington & Burling, known for its commitment to diversity, might be a good fit.

Scenario: During an interview with a firm like Sullivan & Cromwell, you're asked, "Why do you want to work here?" Your response might be, "From my research and discussions with current and former employees, I understand that Sullivan & Cromwell values teamwork, integrity, and commitment to excellence. These align well with my own values. Additionally, I'm drawn to the firm's renowned mergers and acquisitions practice, which aligns with my professional interests and goals. I'm also impressed by the firm's commitment to pro bono work, reflecting its dedication to social responsibility. I believe I would fit well in such a collaborative and moral environment."

By demonstrating your understanding of the firm's culture and how you align with it, you show hiring managers that you're not just looking for any job but specifically a position with their firm. Such a thoughtful approach could set you apart from other candidates.

Conclusion

Understanding what hiring managers want and tailoring your approach can drastically enhance your chances of landing your ideal legal position. It requires diligent research, self-awareness, and genuine commitment. By following these insider tips, you're likely to impress hiring managers and pave the way for a fulfilling legal career.

With the legal market more competitive than ever, being equipped with this knowledge is no longer a luxury but a necessity. Keep yourself updated, hone your skills, and build meaningful relationships. Your ideal legal position might be just around the corner.