



ATTORNEY SEARCH

By Stephen Seckler

FAQ about Legal Recruiting

Legal recruiting is a niche business that caters to a relatively small subset of the legal community. Like any business, legal recruiting is constrained by the business realities of the marketplace. Smaller firms are often unwilling or unable to pay search fees. Firms that *are* open to paying search fees are generally looking for a specific demographic of candidates. What follows is an attempt to answer some of the more common questions we receive (sometimes on a daily basis). I have also included answers to some of the questions that we suspect lawyers don't ask but would like to ask.

1. Why don't recruiters return my phone calls?

It is a mystery to me why any service provider would let a phone call go unanswered. After all, you never know when you are going to meet a potential client or a friend of a potential client. While I do not feel any compulsion to respond to a voicemail message left by a telemarketer, I always try to respond to inquiries (or ask a colleague to respond on my behalf).

Nonetheless, it is a fact of life for many professionals that there are not enough hours in the day to do everything. Sometimes when recruiters receive messages from candidates they know they cannot place, those messages go to the bottom of the priority list. To understand this, it is important to understand the economics of the legal recruiting industry.

2. How do recruiters get paid?

While good recruiters build close relationships with their candidates, recruiting fees are paid by the employer. When a legal employer hires a candidate that was first introduced by a recruiter, the search firm is entitled to a fee (generally 25% of the first-year salary). This fee is usually paid 30 days after the candidate begins working for the firm. Many search firms also guarantee a portion of their fee for a period of months.

Given the salary inflation that has occurred in the legal profession, these fees can get quite large. Employers are therefore not eager to pay search fees unless they are hiring a "stellar" candidate. In the eyes of the client firm, "stellar" generally means an associate with two to six years of experience at a major firm (which usually means strong academics) or a partner with substantial portable billings (i.e., in the hundreds of thousands).

Employers will occasionally ask a search firm to submit a more diverse mix of candidates. But this is only in the event that there is a particular shortage of experienced talent.

3. Can you refer me to a recruiter who works with recent grads/associates who lack large firm experience?

I receive a lot of phone calls from recent law school graduates who are looking for their first legal jobs. I also receive a lot of phone calls from lawyers who lack strong academics and/or large law firm experience. Unfortunately, there is not much that search firms can do to help these two groups. Law firms do not use outside search firms to recruit entry-level talent. Similarly, law firms are generally unwilling to pay search firms for candidates that they can reach through conventional advertising.

If you lack large law firm experience (or experience at a boutique firm), you are probably better off spending your time conducting informational interviews. Find alumni of your law school who are willing to speak with you for a few minutes. Start showing up at bar association meetings for your practice area and make a point of talking to a few new people each time you show up. Ask college and law school classmates to introduce you to lawyers who have practices that interest you.

Searching the classifieds can be part of your strategy. (Signing up for a subscription to LawCrossing, BCG's sister company, is one way to make sure you have access to every job posting out there.) But making an aggressive effort to "meet" the market should be a large part of your strategy.

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If you are unemployed and have the time, try to do work on a contract basis as a way of getting your foot in the door. Mention your availability to do contract work when you are out networking.

Try to avoid contract work which is unlikely to lead to permanent employment. Many of the assignments that you are likely to get through a temporary staffing agency are going to be large document review projects that require an army. It is unlikely that assignments like these will help you to build your skills or your contacts.

4. Which recruiters do in-house placement?

Most search firms do some in-house placement. BCG is unusual in focusing exclusively on law firm placement. When looking for a search firm that does in-house placement, understand that in-house search is very different from law firm search. Virtually all major law firms work with search firms from time to time. But only a subset of corporations will rely on a search firm to hire in-house counsel. More importantly, in the world of law firm search, most search firms have knowledge about the same listings. This is not the case with in-house search.

If you are pursuing other law firm opportunities, the real value of working with a recruiter is that you have someone who can help you sort through your options. In addition, a good recruiter can help you to uncover information that may be important in your decision-making process. A good recruiter can be your agent and help you to communicate effectively with a prospective employer regarding salary, benefits, and terms of employment. For this reason, it makes more sense to work with one recruiter if you are pursuing a lateral move to another firm.

If you are considering an in-house move, a recruiter may play some of the same advisory role. But since good in-house jobs are more difficult to identify, it is to your advantage to work with multiple recruiters. Each search firm may be aware of different opportunities.

Most importantly, if you are thinking about an in-house move, it is in your best interest to do a search which involves working with recruiters, keeping up with all the job boards, and networking aggressively.

5. How do I find a recruiter I can trust?

Finding a recruiter you can trust is similar to finding any service provider. Talk to your friends and see if they know a reputable recruiter in your area. Ask the career services office at your law school if they know anybody. If you identify some names, Google the individuals and see if you can find biographies. Have they written any articles on career-related issues? Is there information about them on a website which tells you more about their recruiting philosophy? Do they follow any ethical guidelines?

6. I have friends at many of the firms where I want to submit my resume. Should I still work with a recruiter?

There are some instances where it might make sense to approach a firm through a personal contact. If a partner at the firm has firsthand knowledge of your capabilities, then it may make sense to make a direct approach through that partner. On the other hand, if your contact only knows you in a social context (e.g., you are friendly with her son) or if the contact is simply a law school classmate who knows nothing about the quality of your work, then you may want to have a recruiter make the initial introduction and have your contact put in a good word for you only after the introduction has been made.

7. If recruiters charge large fees, wouldn't firms rather get a resume directly?

Most companies (law firms included) are not looking for excuses to incur large recruiting fees. On the other hand, trained lateral associates are so valuable to law firms (if they have the work and not enough bodies to do the work) that firms are happy to pay these fees. In the end, the firm will more than earn back the search fee in several months.

8. A recruiter sent my resume to over 30 firms without my permission. Can I resubmit my resume to some of these firms using another search firm?

Submitting a resume to a firm without the candidate's express permission is an unscrupulous practice. Any recruiter with integrity understands that getting your resume into the wrong hands could jeopardize your current position. Nonetheless, we do occasionally hear stories about recruiters who are only out to make a quick buck. Unfortunately, resumes do have a shelf life of at least six months. No law firm wants to risk being responsible for two search fees. So once your resume has been presented to the firm by any source, the law firm will not work with another search firm for at least this amount of time.

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