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## **Secrets of Success for Fall Recruiting**

By Susan G. Manch

As I write, big firm hiring teams are beginning to swarm over law school campuses desperately seeking the best and the brightest candidates for their summer programs. Regardless of which firm they represent, they all want to hire the same person—number one in the class, law review (*grade on*, excuse me), and of course, poised, articulate, mature, and ready to work like mad. For those of you who match this description, you may stop reading now. The only career advice you need is to sit back and enjoy the attention while you have the time to relish it. This is your moment. For those of you who want to work in BIGLAW but might describe your accomplishments differently, read on.

Economics and demographics are poised to deliver a one-two punch to the next wave of aspiring law firm associates. The economy remains sluggish, with firm failures and layoffs headlining legal personnel news for the last two years. Publicized failures of Brobeck in California, Hill & Barlow in Boston, Altheimer & Gray in Chicago, and Arter & Hadden in Ohio demonstrate how widespread the pain has been in the law firm world. A number of firms are busier than ever—especially in litigation and bankruptcy practices—but most firms have scaled back the size of their summer programs and are being more cautious about hiring in general. Most are visiting fewer schools and setting their standards higher and more firmly.

Demographics have an impact as well. As the members of the “Millennial” generation begin graduating from college and entering professional schools, the face of career paths and choices are bound to change. Unlike the relatively puny ranks of Generation X (with 46 million folks), the Millennials are 76 million strong. Competition the likes of which hasn’t been seen since the 80 million Boomers hit the market will define the job market for many years to come. The lagging job market for new grads and these demographic factors are already having an impact on the market. Just last year, applications to law school rose 17.4% and admissions were up 9%. Given that most top-ranked law schools plan to maintain current size or grown only in small increments, this may change the face of graduating classes in the next few years. The LSAT median score spread for the 2003 entering class at Harvard narrowed to a range of 173 (top 25% of the class) to 167 (bottom 25% of the class).

Knowing that not every firm represents long-term career value and that competition for slots in the best firms will be heated, you should plan your approach to recruiting season with care.

### **Which Firms are Strongest?**

Research is important here. Check out the AMLAW 100 and the NLJ 250 to compare revenues, profits, and leverage figures. Read the firms' websites to learn about practice areas, client focus, and strategic vision. "Google" each firm to get a sense of the broader industry buzz on the firm as a presence in their markets or nationally. Look at published firm guides like the Vault Guides (national and for large cities) and peruse the Greedy-style chat boards, but recognize this type of information is based on surveys or personal opinions rather than facts. Once you have this research in hand, talk to people who have had direct experience with each firm—past summer associates on campus, friends and family, or law school career advisors. This level of thoroughness should provide you with a clear picture of the firms you care about.

### **Rising Above the Pack**

Once you have determined which firms are worth pursuing, go about getting a sense of who they are looking for. Every firm has a success profile. You may be able to glean this information from their website or in your talks with people who have been connected with the firm in some way. Look for clues on who becomes successful (read partner bios and see which of their attorneys are in the news), who is most satisfied (personal contacts and survey info), and how they describe themselves and who they are looking for (web site and recruiting brochure). Pull out adjectives that represent themes from the information gathered. These are the core of the firm's selection criteria for new hires, whether they are aware of it or not. Look at your own resume and accomplishments and determine which aspects of your background and experiences would most likely appeal to the firms you are interested in. Be prepared to talk about them in your interviews, looking for opportunities to highlight your similarities to the firm's success profile. Of course it never hurts to let firms know that you have done your homework, as well. Asking thoughtful questions about the firm and its practice send the message that you apply reason and judgment to your career decision-making process.

At the beginning of this piece, I mentioned that every firm is looking for the best of the best, but every candidate has some flaws regardless of his or her class standing. Know your own and be prepared to turn them into advantages rather than try to hide them. If your grades are not what you hoped they might be, talk about incremental improvements from one semester to the next or point to undergraduate successes that suggest that your first year law school grades are not fully representative of your candle power. If there are no real work experiences to speak of in your history, think about volunteer work you have done or clubs or teams you have been a part of. No doubt these experiences allowed you to develop interpersonal, leadership, organizational, team-building, or communication skills. Look at everything you have done from a new angle to make certain you are prepared to bring out all of your selling points.

### **In the On-Campus Interview**

Think of the interview as a 20 minute audition. This is your opportunity to show an attorney from your target firm what you would be like as a colleague. Many firm candidate evaluation forms include questions asking, "Would you like to work with this

person?” or “Would you consider giving this person an important assignment?” With that in mind, think about the message your appearance and demeanor in the interview send—do you act and look like a professional, someone who this attorney would feel comfortable introducing to his/her most important client? Are you a confident communicator? Prepare by scanning over your resume and making sure you can speak with authority on any entry found there. Oral expression, reasoning, and analysis are on most firms’ checklists for candidate evaluation. They will be assessing your answers to see if you can think on your feet and put thoughts together in a logical fashion. Many interviewers will not come prepared to ask thoughtful questions. Candidates who stand out under these circumstances are those who can comfortably keep the conversation going, asking questions and subtly weaving his or her accomplishments and career aspirations into the discussion. Listening carefully in the interview allows you to hear what the interviewer is looking for and evaluative factors he/she may use to recommend an offer.

To achieve this level of fluidity in the interview process may require practice and it makes sense to participate in mock interview practice at your school’s career center. In addition, get two friends together to help you practice. Take turns having one person interview, one be interviewed, and one observe the other two. Using a triad model is the most effective way to practice interviewing skills because you have someone standing apart from the interview itself, watching your performance and the reactions of the interviewer as the conversation unfolds. Remember, you only have 20 minutes to secure a callback offer so it is critical to learn to get a lot of information across in a succinct manner.

### **In the Callback**

Candidates can shoot themselves in the foot during the callback process by believing it is only the interviews themselves that count. Being rude to a receptionist or letting your hair down a bit too much at lunch with the associates can knock you out of the running as quickly as poor grades. If the on-campus interview is an audition, the callback is opening night. Everyone is watching you and measuring your fit with the firm’s standards and culture. Partners are trying to assess intelligence, interest in private practice, and willingness to work hard. Associates are trying to figure out if you are someone they’d like to eat pizza with at 1:00 am during a colossal document production. This is also your opportunity to get a real feel for what it’s like to work for a firm. Watch carefully. How do people interact with one another? Are they casual and relaxed, clearly enjoying one another or do they even seem to know one another? Are doors closed or open? Is there a big difference between the personalities of the partners and the associates or do you sense many commonalities? Could you see yourself coming to this place every day? Has anything about the work discussed sounded really interesting or engaging? These are just a few of the questions you will need to answer while you are making the rounds at each firm during callbacks.

### **Making a Decision**

Barring major catastrophes (or really bad grades) and with all this thoughtful preparation and careful execution, you should be the recipient of several offers from your top choice

firms. How do you know which one is the right one? Most law students say they fall back on two primary decision-making factors when choosing their summer firms—geography and prestige. When you think about it, neither is really the best determining factor for long-term career success. Geography is important if you are someone who really can't imagine yourself far away from home or known territory, but most successful professionals today will need to move several times in their careers to achieve their goals. Prestige is useful if you want to hedge your bets by getting a known name on your resume regardless of whether you believe it's a personal fit. Remember though, you are less likely to thrive in an environment that is not comfortable for you and failing at a prestige firm doesn't add much to your resume. The best decision-making factors are those which are based on assessing the probability of your being successful and satisfied in a particular firm. Availability and strength of the practice area in which you are interested, senior and junior people who you can connect with, the stability of the firm's business model and competitive advantages in the market, opportunities for training and development, and commitment to external interests you may share (e.g., community involvement, pro bono work, active business development). These factors are more likely to help you make a good decision about employment.

My final advice on fall recruiting is not to get caught up in someone else's dream. This is a great time to take a serious look at life in the big firms. But ultimately, large law firms are not for everyone. You need to look beyond the high salaries and decide if this is truly the environment in which you want to practice. It's not just the number of hours required that should be considered, but also the unique working environment of an enterprise in which the only product produced is the work of the collective intelligence of the firm's attorneys. Only you can decide if it fits your personality, interests, and professional goals. Good luck and happy hunting!

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