

Job Hunting in a Down Market

By Susan G. Manch

Times are tough and the economics of the legal marketplace are uncertain. Many associates are struggling to make their hours and firms that are busy are worried about struggles yet to come. Unpredictable markets can make job-hunting a risky proposition. So should you stay in a job that's not right for you based on the "bird in the hand" theory? Not necessarily. Jobs can still be found in this sort of market, but you have to take a strategic approach.

A strategic approach includes setting goals, doing your homework, preparing personally, and following through.

SETTING GOALS

What is driving you into this job market? Is it boredom or are your core career interests not being fulfilled? Any job can provide a learning opportunity and until you have articulated explicit career goals you can't hope to wring the most from either your current or future job. A career goal does not need to be an end point (think partner or general counsel); rather sound career goals identify ways you would ideally like to be spending your time at work and the trajectory you would like your career to be on. For example, solid career goals would be: *"to get significant trial experience and be in a position to qualify for a high level prosecutorial position at the state or federal level"* or *"have access to a consistent deal flow that will allow me to develop a partner-level expertise in mergers and acquisitions."* Specific goals such as these inform every key decision you will have to make as you consider your job search—first, can your goal be met through your current job and if not, which organizations should you consider, what skills will you highlight on your resume, how will you state your interests and career goals in an interview, and how should you choose from among multiple offers.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Once you have a clear idea of what you want, you have work to do. Your research skills will serve you well in this effort. If law firms interest you, check out the legal press publications to compare revenues, profits, and leverage figures. Look at job ads to get an idea of who is hiring and what they are looking for (but don't apply yet or call search firms—you are not ready!). Read firms' websites to learn about their practice areas, client focus, and strategic vision. Do a general search of 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 law firm guides and peruse the blogs and chat boards (recognizing that this type of information may be severely biased). Once you have this research in hand, talk to people who have had direct experience with each firm—friends from law school who work there, for example. This in-depth homework should provide you with a clear picture of the firms you should target.

If you are looking at public service, in-house jobs, or non-profits, the process is the same. Find the industry or professional publications that profile the employers. Search their job listings to get a better idea of what people do in jobs with which you are not familiar. Network and gather data from sources. Do informational interviews if you are uncertain of the type of employer or job you are seeking.

Once you have determined which employers are worth pursuing, you'll want to get a sense of what they are looking for. Every employer has an implicit success profile. You may be able to discern this information from their website or by talking with people who have been connected with the organization. Look for clues on who becomes successful (read partner or

general counsel bios and check out who's in the news or annual report), who is most satisfied (ask personal contacts and check survey info), and how the organization describes itself and its recruiting prospects (look at the "careers" sections on websites). Gather all this intelligence and then pull out **adjectives** that represent themes from the information you've gathered (such as entrepreneurial, client-service oriented, collaborative): These are the core selection criteria for new hires, even if the firm's recruiters don't say so.

Look at your own résumé and accomplishments, and determine which aspects of your background and experiences would most likely appeal to these organizations. 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; asking thoughtful questions about the firm and its practice sends the message that you are being as careful about your search as they are about hiring the right person.

Every employer is looking for the best of the best—particularly in an uncertain market. Know your weaknesses and be prepared to turn them into advantages rather than try to hide them. If your school or grades are not top tier, focus on the depth and scope of your experiences and firm/community activities. If your work experience has been substandard, be ready to articulate steps you have taken to address this (training, pro bono work, committee or community activities). Look at everything you have done from a new angle so you can be prepared to bring out all of your selling points.

PREPARING PERSONALLY

Think of the initial interview as a 30-minute audition. Even though some interviews may be longer, it pays to prepare as if this is all the time you will have to make a winning impression. This is your opportunity to show an employer what you would be like as a colleague. Many candidate evaluation forms ask, "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 send—are you prepared with knowledge of the organization and job, do you act and look like a professional, are you a confident communicator? If you struggle with extemporaneous speaking, now would be a great time to engage a personal communications coach. It is a great investment in your future and reduces a primary job-hunting anxiety.

Prepare for each interview by scanning over your résumé; make sure you can speak with authority on any entry found there. Oral expression, reasoning, and analysis are on many organizations' interview checklists. 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 can comfortably keep the conversation going, asking questions and subtly weaving their accomplishments and career aspirations into the discussion stand out under these circumstances. Listening carefully allows you to pick up on what the interviewer is looking for and the criteria he or she may use to recommend an offer.

Ask two friends to help you practice interviewing. Have one person interview you and the other observe the interaction. 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 may have only 30 minutes to secure a second interview, so it is critical to practice getting information across in a succinct manner.

Once you have secured additional interviews, you have a chance to assess the employer

more carefully. Try to get a feel for what it's like to work for that firm. Watch and listen. How do people interact with one another? Are they casual and relaxed, clearly enjoying one another, or do they seem to barely know one another? Are doors closed or open? Is there a big difference between the personalities of the senior and more junior lawyers, or do you sense many commonalities? Could you see yourself coming to this place every workday? Has anything about the work discussed sounded really interesting or engaging? These are just a few of the questions you will need to contemplate while you are in the interviewing process.

FOLLOWING THROUGH

With all your thoughtful preparation and careful execution, barring major catastrophes, you should be the recipient of several offers. How do you know which one is the right one? Most candidates say they fall back on two primary factors when choosing their employers: the people and the substance of the work. Those are important criteria, but you have to go a step further. The best way to make a decision is to assess the probability of being successful and satisfied in a particular job and organization: availability and skill-building potential of the work, senior and junior people you like and respect, stability of the organization's business model and its competitive position in the market, opportunities for training and development, and commitment to external interests you may share (e.g., community involvement, pro bono work). These are the factors that are more likely to help you decide which organization is right for you.

Only you can decide which job and organization are right for you, but it is a much easier decision when you employ a strategic approach. Good luck and happy hunting!

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