



Essential Job Search Strategies for a Down Economy

Over the past few years, legal employers were in a war to attract and retain talent. Firm attorneys received daily calls from headhunters encouraging them to change employers. It was a recruits' market. But, unfortunately, the market has changed.

So what do attorneys in this lateral hiring market need to do?

1) Create a compelling pitch. Whenever you speak with a new contact, make sure your pitch describes your experience and the type of opportunity you are seeking. If you have been laid off or are currently out of work, don't start off with that fact. Too often, it is a conversation-killer, which is the last thing you want in a networking situation. Instead, focus on your experience and the type of position or contact you are looking for. For example: "I have 10 years of experience litigating products liability cases for the pharmaceutical industry. I'm looking to expand my contacts in that area, and so, if you have any contacts in-house at a pharma company, I would really appreciate an introduction."

2) Online postings are a good starting point, but it is very rare that a candidate gets in the door from an online resume submission alone. In a flooded job market, employers are inundated with resumes (online postings get 500-2000 resumes, in general) and there are a lot of high-caliber candidates, so merely submitting your resume is not enough.

If you do decide to apply for positions online, make sure your resume and cover letter are flawless (this holds true regardless of how you submit your resume). For each cover letter, you should tailor it to the qualifications specified in the posting. Some employers use computer programs to scan cover letters and resumes, and the programs search for keywords that match the job qualifications. If your resume doesn't contain those keywords, it will often get discarded after an automated search.

3) Network, network, network. Instead of submitting resumes blindly, a better practice is to use online postings to identify opportunities, and then to search for a connection or introduction to someone who works there. Use tools like LinkedIn to see if any of your contacts work at the employer (including alums from former employers, law school classmates, etc.); also check out alumni lists and databases. You can then ask your contact for a warm introduction to the right hiring person.

Note that when you make a new contact or reconnect with one, you should not ask for a job right away. Networking is about building relationships. Have lunch or coffee with your contact and treat the time as more of an informational interview. Find out more about their work, how the economy is impacting their work and company, and tell them you'd appreciate it if they keep you in mind if they hear of any open positions that could be good fit. (Make sure they know about your expertise and background and have in mind type of position you are looking for.)

4) Focus your search. If you are looking for an in-house position, target specific companies and focus your efforts on a particular sector. It is much easier (and more productive) to have a narrowly targeted approach. Do your research on the industry and relevant organizations. What events, CLE's and seminars do key employees and contacts in that field attend?

In general, the majority of your networking time (70% is a good guideline) should be spent on a narrowly targeted search for job opportunities and contacts at key employers and the industry/sector in which you'd like to work. Spend the remainder of your time on networking more broadly: attend alumni and bar association events, join industry groups, volunteer, and reconnect with your contacts in different sectors and industries. You never know where a good lead or introduction may come from.

Article by Melissa McClenaghan Martin, the President of CWI Advisory Services and a member of the City Bar Career Advancement and Management Committee, 2010.