How firms handle lateral recruiting

The lateral recruiting process in law firms is more complex and takes more time than the law student recruiting process. Most lateral candidates don’t realize how long finding a job often takes. Allow up to 90 days just for the interview process. If your goal is to change jobs in January, I’d start looking at least in June of the previous year. To be on the safe side, allow a good nine months for the process, from start to finish.

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Many attorneys don’t give themselves enough time simply because they don’t know how the interview process works in law firms. Well, I’m going to tell you how it basically works so that when you plan your job search, it should be a little easier.

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Lateral candidates are often treated to the same luxuries as law students during the interview process. But often, the process is more complex, more planned and executed, and more in-depth than with law student candidates. Therefore, lateral interviews are sometimes more difficult to schedule and take more time.

Screening Candidates

Some firms thoroughly screen lateral candidates over the telephone prior to bringing them in for interviews, and others, if using a headhunter, expect the headhunter to prequalify the candidate. If your entree into a firm was through your networking skills, anticipate that the firm will check you out at some point, perhaps even before bringing you in.

It’s too risky to parade a stream of lateral candidates through a firm without first making sure they are viable candidates. Confidential conversations could be overheard, clients might see that the firm is interviewing lateral candidates from the competition and may not like it, and there’s always the risk that the candidate’s firm will discover that he or she is out interviewing. All of these situations can create negative feelings and ultimately hurt business.

Interviews

Lateral candidates, at all levels, usually interview with partners and with members of the practice group in which they would work if they joined the firm. Interviews are often thirty minutes in length, and a half-day interview schedule is common. You are often treated to lunch, cocktails, dinner, or sometimes more than one. It is common for a lateral candidate to return for a second round of interviews. In some cases, you may be asked to return for a third time if scheduling interviews with key attorneys in the firm proves difficult. Firms have their own requirements regarding which specific attorneys have to meet with lateral candidates before final hiring decisions are made.

Ask the firm you are interviewing with what its routine practices are for hiring laterals. And get them to tell you how long they anticipate the process to take from start to finish and whether they have just started interviewing candidates or if they’re at the end of the process.

If a firm goes to the time and expense of bringing you in for several rounds of interviews, then you should assume that they have a genuine interest in you as a viable lateral candidate. Too much time and money are at stake (especially if interviewing only with partners) to waste your time and their attorneys’ time. But do not get your hopes up even at this point in the game. You should always expect the unexpected, and never assume that you are going to get the job until you have an offer in hand. There are simply too many unexpected things that can happen to prevent you from getting the job.

KEYS TO A SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEW

Lateral candidates, like law students, are often ill prepared for the interview process. And many have not interviewed for years. When you interview, preparation is nine-tenths of the law. Take the time to do your homework before you get started. And remember that firms often expect more from experienced candidates and are less forgiving when mistakes are made. Below are some interview tips that you may find useful as a rusty lateral candidate:

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1. Bring a list of prepared questions with you that are suitable for experienced attorneys. You also should prepare thought-provoking questions as a lateral candidate. Your genuine interest in a firm is often displayed by the fact that you took the time to research them and therefore have prepared good questions. Firms think that you’re not interested in them if you don’t ask them questions, no matter how many years you’ve been practicing law.

2. Leave arrogance at home. Successful lateral attorneys, especially those with large amounts of portable business or with enviable connections, can come across as arrogant or cocky during the interview process. Leave that attitude at home or at least at your current law firm. If you have enough clout, you may be able to get away with it, but who really needs this kind of attitude?

3. Have sound and solid reasons for changing jobs. Make sure that whatever your reasons for changing jobs, you come across as convincing. You need to be seen as consistent. Getting mixed messages about your reasons for looking around is an immediate red flag. If you are ever perceived as a risk, the transaction will never take place.

4. Treat the staff with respect at all times. Even experienced attorneys, at any level, should treat the staff members with dignity and respect. No one wants to hire a jerk. This is a bigger red flag in some firms than in others.

5. Ask to interview with associates as well as partners. No matter how much experience you have, it’s always a good idea to talk with attorneys at all levels in a firm. Their perspectives are often completely different, and it is in your best interest to get as complete a picture of the firm as possible. If your interview schedule does not include both partners and associates, ask to interview with both groups.

WHAT CAN GO WRONG DURING THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

There are numerous things that can go wrong during the lateral interview process that many candidates never count on. Many strong lateral candidates, who counted on offers that appeared to be coming down the track, have discovered to their dismay that a glitch or an unexpected development kept them from getting the offer they thought they had sewn up. The following tips can help you head off some of the more common “glitches”:

1. Have a general idea of your salary and partnership requirements. There is an obvious place in the interview process for salary and partnership negotiations. But if your expectations on these issues are in a different galaxy than those of the firm, you’re probably wasting your time as well as the firm’s. Ask, in the very beginning, what the firm’s typical salary ranges are and typically what kind of partnership credit they grant laterals.

2. Determine early if any conflicts of interest exist. If you have been involved in a case that may preclude you from working on cases at other firms, put these facts on the table at the beginning of the interview process. Sometimes Chinese walls can be built, shielding an attorney from working on certain matters, but clients often have to approve such arrangements. I’ve seen this break deals on several occasions, much to the chagrin of the attorneys involved. Don’t let this happen to you.

3. Never overestimate the amount of your portable business. If ever in doubt about how much of your current business will walk with you to another firm, be conservative in your estimate. Lateral attorneys almost always overestimate how much of their business will “port” to another firm. Therefore, firms often discount your estimates. For example, if you claim to have $750,000 of portable business, a firm will assume that you have between $500,000 and $600,000. Tell a potential firm how much business you currently have, and then give them estimates on how much you realistically think will port. If you are completely off in your estimates, it can ultimately be a deal breaker. It’s much better to claim to have $400,000 and end up with $500,000 than the other way around.

4. Don’t put all your eggs in one basket. A change of plans is a regular occurrence in a law firm. Operational indecisiveness is common in law firms, especially when it comes to recruiting. Never assume that you have an offer until you receive it in writing. Therefore, have several irons in the fire in case the firm you thought was going to give you an offer doesn’t come through.

HOW FIRMS WEIGH LATERAL CREDENTIALS
Weighing lateral credentials is not an exact science. Obviously, law firms rank and view laterals' credentials differently. Research performed by the National Association for Law Placement resulted in a "list" of credentials that are deemed important by law firms when recruiting lateral attorneys. While many of the items on this list are beyond your control to change, you can target firms, through your own due diligence, that may find your credentials noteworthy. NALP's list, which assumes that due diligence has been performed, includes the following factors:
- Prior employees) and history of mobility
- Expected fit with firm culture
- Quality of legal products
- Experience, expertise in specific practice area
- Law school attended
- Grade point average
- Honors, awards, recognitions
- Personality, drive, recognition
- Client following

Keep these factors in mind throughout the recruiting process, and attempt to ascertain which of these traits a particular firm deems most important. Indirectly ask firm members which traits they deem most important. If you are repeatedly told that all members of the firm attended prestigious law schools and you did not, you may be wasting your time attempting to go through the interview process. Find firms that will look upon your skill set and credentials in a positive light. You'll never find a 100 percent match, but learn not to waste your time seeking out firms with which you have little in common.

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