Strategies for the Callback Interview with a Law Firm

The callback interview provides an opportunity for you to put your best face forward to the firm. It is a longer interview during which you will meet a number of attorneys, giving you a well-rounded look at firm life.

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Depending on size, specialty, and location, firms use a variety of methods to invite people for callback interviews. The methods are usually one of these three: the partner or associate with whom you interview on campus will either (1) call you, (2) write you, or, in rare cases, (3) invite you back to the firm during your on-campus interview. When invited, you will be given the name of a person in the firm’s recruiting department.

You should make every effort to schedule your callback on the same day you receive your invitation to do so. You want to look eager to visit the firm.

You may be invited for your callback by letter. You should read this letter carefully before calling to schedule. Although most letters follow a standard format, you should read each word for word. If you miss an instruction for scheduling that is explained plainly in your offer letter, you risk looking foolish.

On-the-Spot Invitations

On-the-spot invitations are the exception, not the rule. That said, many different types of firms use this method to invite students for callbacks. If the on-campus interviewer invites you for a callback during your on-campus-interview, respond calmly but enthusiastically. Make sure you get all of the necessary scheduling information from your interviewer. You will need the interviewer’s business card and the name and telephone number of the person responsible for scheduling your callback.

Do not let gossip feed your insecurities with regard to on-the-spot invitations. If you hear that a classmate got an on-the-spot invitation from a firm you interviewed with but you did not, do not assume that you have been rejected. There are a number of possibilities as to why you may not have gotten one.

Many times during the busiest parts of the recruiting season, attorneys who had never conducted on-campus interviews may be asked to attend them. When these "first-timers" are given permission to give on-the-spot invitations for call-backs, some may go a little nuts, inviting everyone with whom they have a modicum of rapport. Conversely, some don’t invite anyone back; they are indecisive and think they can make a more informed decision if they take some time to look over resumes and notes at home after having met the students. So, when several attorneys from one firm conduct the on-campus interviews, the fact that your classmate got an on-the-spot invitation does not necessarily mean you will not receive a callback by telephone or letter.

Similarly, on-campus interviewers are often instructed to give on-the-spot invitations only to students who meet certain criteria (generally grade-point-average minimums); however, this does not necessarily mean that you will be excluded from consideration. If you make a strong favorable impression on campus, your interviewer may argue that you should be considered further even if you do not meet the firm’s general minimum criteria.

Give complete, accurate, and reliable contact information on your resume. Make it easy for your interviewer to get in touch with you. This requires some basic but essential preparation. You must have an answering machine or voicemail system that is dependable and that is turned on whenever you are unable to answer the phone. Often this basic rule was overlooked. Partners would say they had spoken to all the students they invited for callbacks except for one. Frustrated, they would say this guy’s answering machine isn’t working and they don’t really have time to keep calling him.

Make sure you are not that guy. Not to have an answering machine while you are job hunting creates credibility problems with respect to whether or not you want a job. It also raises questions about your professional competence. Your outgoing message should correspond with the number on your resume and state clearly your name and phone number.

Your outgoing message should be simple and professional. Check your messages frequently. If an attorney
calls you, return the call promptly. A rule of thumb is not to let twenty-four hours go by before you return the call.

If you use a cellular phone number on your resume, do not answer the phone at an inconvenient time. If you are in your car in the middle of a busy intersection or out for drinks with your friends, do not pick up your phone. Call back when there is peace and quiet in the background and you can give your caller undivided attention.

You must make sure to keep all interviewers informed of any change in the contact information on your resume. If you are unsure of your living arrangements or expect them to change during the recruiting season, rent a post office box temporarily and check it every day.

Include your email address on your resume only if you check and respond to emails daily. And again, make sure your user name is simple and professional: “gothandproud@aol.com” is not appropriate. Use your full name, or as close to it, as possible.

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You Have Not Heard From a Firm

Sometimes a couple of weeks will go by during which you will not hear from a firm. This can be discouraging, but as long as you have not received notice that you are no longer being considered, do not give up hope. The attorney who interviewed you may be overwhelmed with work or traveling for business reasons. And it is always possible that some human error is causing the delay.

There are, of course, some other more substantive explanations why you may not have heard from a firm. You may be a marginal rather than a definite invite. This means exactly what it sounds like: you are in the “maybe” pile. This usually means that it will take a few more meetings of the hiring committee for the firm to come to a decision on you. Rather than sit around and wait for a response, take this time to lobby hard to tip yourself into the “yes” pile, so you can get in the door and make a personal impression. Find out from your career services office the names of some attorneys at the firm from your alma mater or law school, or dig up some friends from a former employer who might have influence.

If you have not heard from a law firm within one to two weeks after your on-campus interview (depending on what time frame your interviewer indicated it would take for the firm to get back to you), you should call the recruiting department to inquire about the status of your application; they are used to calls like this and are there to help you with your questions.

Rejection

A near-inevitable part of the interviewing process is the rejection letter. Even those with the best grades get rejection letters during the recruiting season. There is no real consolation for the feeling of disappointment that comes with a “no-offer” letter. The best thing is not to focus on the rejection. When you open a letter, as soon as it is clear that you have been rejected, throw it away. Some would read and reread their rejection letters. Poring over how impersonal it is will get you nowhere (they are very impersonal). Just throw it away and move on.

If you are rejected by your first choice of law firms, do not get upset. Instead, you should take the following steps. First, call your interviewer. Even if you do not reach him or her in person, leave the following message on his or her voicemail: "I didn't get an offer from your firm, but I enjoyed meeting you very much and was very impressed by the work that you do. I've decided to spend my summer with Firm B even though you were my first choice. I hope we can stay in touch and perhaps over the next year your needs may change and we might find a way that we can work together."

Second (after your summer) follow up

Call your interviewer from Firm A again. Explain yourself with an introduction such as, "I met you last year during on-campus interviews. I ended up spending my summer at Firm B. While I really enjoyed my experience, I remember that I was very impressed with the work you do. If you are interviewing third years, I would appreciate a chance to meet with you again to tell you about the experience I gained this summer."

Interviewing is always worth another chance, and like anything else, you improve with practice. Even if you have a terrific summer at your second choice, I recommend trying again. Always keep every door possible open to you.
If you are rejected and wonder why, do not be afraid to call the firm and ask. Think of it this way: they have already made their decision so you have nothing to lose. When you call, just explain that you have been rejected and are wondering why. If the answer is that you did not make a grade cutoff, do not beat yourself up about it; this is something that, unfortunately, you cannot change. If it was something more personal like your attitude, listen up and do not kill the messenger. This is something that you can change. If you did not get an offer based on bad attitude or inappropriate behavior, you should do some straightening up in that area. Use criticism as a learning experience for the next time you interview.

Scheduling

Scheduling your callback is easy. You call the recruiting department, choose a convenient time, and set it up. Be sure that the time you have chosen works for you. Calling to reschedule your interview is not appreciated and looks unprofessional.

You may get an offer for summer employment from your top three choices of firms early on in the recruiting season. If you are going to pursue your top three exclusively, do not waste your time or the time of other firms by scheduling callbacks with them. Be courteous and call the other firms immediately to say you will decline their invitation.

While scheduling your interview, ask the recruiter how many attorneys you will be meeting during your callback. This varies from firm to firm; expect to meet anywhere from three to ten. This is a big difference and it behooves you to know this before you begin. Make sure you know how to reach the recruiter; it is useful for you to have his or her email address, especially for minor questions and issues. At this point, do not bother to ask for the names of the attorneys you will meet; there is no way the firm can know this yet. Call or email the recruiter a couple of days before your interview to confirm. Now he or she will have a better idea of which attorneys you will meet. You can also email the recruiter on the morning of the interview to confirm and to double-check the names of the attorneys. Keep in mind that this scheduled interview is not carved in stone; there is always a possibility that any attorney will get busy and have to cancel at the last minute.

Also, the scheduling of the interviews for the next day may start that evening, so it is a possibility that you can find out the names of the attorneys you will meet the night before your interview. Remember to keep checking your email.

Lunch Interviews

Some firms offer to conduct part of your interview over lunch; this is usually where you meet junior associates. Some students find these arduous because the interview lasts the length of a meal, but the majority get excited about the prospect of having a free lunch at an upscale restaurant, no matter how long the interview.

If you opt for a lunch interview, brush up on your manners. Know the basic rules of etiquette before you put yourself in a potentially uncomfortable situation. If you are comfortable with your manners, then go on interview lunches by all means.

Departmental Preferences and International Leanings

While knowing the names of the attorneys you will meet is enormously helpful for you during your firm research, you are not lost without them. From firm literature, you will discern the department heads and major players at the firm.

Let the recruiter know the practice area that interests you when scheduling. Learn as much as you possibly can about that department before your interview. If your interest is in Litigation, for example, familiarize yourself with the names of the head or heads of that department. Know in what areas the department specializes and some of its representative clients. All of this information can be found in the firm resume, on the firm website, and through conversations you may have with attorneys from the firm.

If you are interested in moving to another country a few years down the road, find out if the firm has a satellite office there. Ask to meet with someone who has worked for the firm abroad, for he or she can give insight about the experience and the effect it has had on his or her career.

The Martindale-Hubbell Directory and Firm Websites
Once you find out the names of the attorneys you will meet, look them up in what is called the Martindale-Hubbell directory. Martindale-Hubbell is a listing of information on every attorney practicing at firms with offices in the United States. Here is also where you will find some general information, like the locations of a firm's foreign offices. Your law school library should have a copy of Martindale. It is also available online at www.marhub.com. Martindale is the Bible of listings of lawyers; when you read it you will understand why. An attorney's listing in Martindale can get very detailed. Partners' listings are usually more dense than associates'.

You will find:

1. Where and when he or she was born
2. Undergraduate and graduate (law school and non-Legal) education
3. Honor societies and journals
4. Other firms where he or she has worked
5. Published articles (if you have time, and the articles were written in the last few years, look these up and read them)
6. In the case of a partner, the year he or she made partner, the way this is worded is "became a member of the firm"

Arm yourself with this information and let the attorney know that you have done some homework. More than likely it will come in handy during your interview and you only stand to gain from this. Further, if you and your interviewer have any personal or professional information in common like you are on the same journal he or she was on at his or her alma mater, then you have a great conversation piece for your interview. Remember that familiarity breeds conversation and this is very helpful in securing an offer.

Biographies of attorneys are usually listed on a firm's website. You should read these in addition to attorneys' entries in Martindale-Hubbell. There may be information in one source that is not in the other.

Be careful about how you bring up the information you have learned about your interviewer. Some candidates did so much research that they ended up looking like stalkers. For example, rather than saying, "I was also born in Asheville. You don't meet many people from Asheville here in Chicago." say: "I notice you do White Collar Crime work. That is an area that has always interested me..." Do not say, "I notice you wrote an article about AIDS policy," if the article was written in 1987 and the author is an accomplished Energy lawyer.

Strategy

When scheduling, prioritize which firms are your top choices and try to see them first. It is to your advantage to get in the door as soon as possible. It will save you time to secure a desirable job early on in the season. The recruiters are at the firm a lot so it is acceptable to call them late at night or early in the morning to schedule your callback. If the recruiter is unavailable when you call, leave your name, telephone number, and the name of your law school very clearly on his or her voicemail. If your call is not returned the next day, be persistent. Recruiters expect you to "bug" them; they understand that you want to get your interview scheduled quickly.

In addition to fitting in your top firms first, some of you may want to slip a "safe" firm, or a firm from which you expect to get an offer, in the beginning of your callback schedule. Starting out the season with an offer will boost your confidence, and you will be more relaxed during the interviews with your top choices.

Try your best to limit the number of your callbacks to one per day. This may be impossible sometimes, especially if you are traveling to another city, but it is taxing to interview twice in one day and you do not want to be tired. Partners and associates would often comment on how an interviewee seemed exhausted during an interview.

They know how hectic the process is and will try to be sympathetic. However, you do not want your fatigue to be mistaken for apathy; this could be the deal-breaker for you.

Travel Expenses

Firms reimburse for travel expenses. When making arrangements you should be familiar with the firm's reimbursement policy. These vary from firm to firm, so make sure you understand the policy of the firm.
you are meeting. Be judicious in your spending of the firm’s money; bills are examined carefully by the firm at some point or other. Do not raid the mini-bar or watch three movies in one night.

**Read the Newspaper**

Another way to facilitate a conversation is pretty easy: read the newspaper on the morning of your interview. Familiarizing yourself with current events, both business and general, will give you something to talk about. In fact, you may be in an awkward situation and come across as ignorant to your interviewer if something from the morning’s headlines comes up in an interview and you know nothing about it.

Read business sections carefully. If the firm you are visiting is mentioned in your local paper’s business section that morning, you should know about it. Not only will you have something to talk about in your interviews with partners, but you will also exhibit your overall interest in the business world.

In addition to business news, it is enormously helpful while interviewing to know what is going on in the world generally and to have an opinion on these issues in case they are brought up. An interview that turns into a flowing conversation makes a good impression. Familiarize yourself with current events with the aim of speaking about business. You are applying to work in a business environment so this is an easy topic to discuss with any of your interviewers. Also, sticking to business keeps you away from topics that can be personal, like politics or religious issues.

The papers you should read are The Wall Street Journal and the best-regarded paper in the geographical areas that are the focus of your job search, for example, The Boston Globe for Boston, The Washington Post for Washington, and The New York Times for New York. The Financial Times and Barron's are terrific also. The more information you have, the better.

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