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On-Campus Crush: Get Yourself Hired

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As you read this, hiring teams from big law firms are beginning to swarm over law school campuses, desperately seeking the best and the brightest candidates for their 2004 summer programs. Regardless of which firm they represent, they all want to hire the same person -- the student who's at the top of the class, on a 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 at a top firm 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 associates. The economy remains sluggish, with firm failures and layoffs headlining legal news for the last two years. The closing of San Francisco's Brobeck, Boston's Hill & Barlow, Chicago's Altheimer & Gray, and Cleveland's Arter & Hadden 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 faces 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, driving competition for jobs to a level that hasn't been seen since 80 million Baby Boomers hit the market.

The lagging job market for new grads and these demographics are already having an impact. Just last year, applications to law schools rose 17.4 percent and admissions were up by 9 percent. Given that most top-ranked law schools plan to maintain current size or grow only in small increments, the face of graduating classes may change in the next few years. For example, the LSAT median score spread for the 2003 entering class at Harvard narrowed to six points: from 167 (bottom 25 percent of the class) to 173 (top 25 percent).

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.

PICK YOUR TARGETS

Here's where your research skills will serve you well. Check out the AmLaw 100 <http://www.law.com/jsp/article.jsp?id=1056139901599> and the NLJ 250 <http://www.law.com/jsp/article.jsp?id=1036630439044> to compare revenues, profits, and leverage figures. Read the firms' Web sites to learn about their practice areas, client focus, and strategic vision. Search each firm on the Web to get a sense of the broader industry buzz on the firm as a presence in their markets or nationally. Look at firm guides published by Vault (national and for large cities) and peruse the "Greedy"-style chat boards, but recognize that 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 advisers. This in-depth homework should provide you with a clear picture of the firms you should target.

Once you have determined which firms are worth pursuing, you'll want to get a sense of whom they are looking for. Every firm has a success profile, whether it knows it or not. You may be able to glean this information from a firm's Web site or in talking with people who have been connected with the firm in some way. Look for clues on who becomes successful (read partner bios and find out who's in the news), who is most satisfied (ask personal contacts and check survey info), and how the firm describes itself and its recruiting prospects (see the Web site and recruiting brochure). Pull out adjectives that represent themes from the information you've gathered: 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 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; asking thoughtful questions about the firm and its practice sends the message that you are being as careful about your career decision as they are about hiring the right person.

As I mentioned above, 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 weaknesses 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, you can 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, be ready to discuss volunteer work you have done or clubs or teams you have been active in. No doubt, these experiences allowed you to develop interpersonal, leadership, organizational, team-building, and

communication skills. Look at everything you have done from a new angle, so you can be prepared to bring out all of your selling points.

YOUR AUDITION

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 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 in the interview send -- do you act and look like a professional, someone who this attorney would feel comfortable introducing to an important client? Are you a confident communicator?

Prepare by scanning over your résumé; make sure you can speak with authority on any entry found there. Oral expression, reasoning, and analysis are on most firms' 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 stand out under these circumstances are those who can comfortably keep the conversation going, asking questions and subtly weaving their accomplishments and career aspirations into the discussion. 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.

To do your best, it makes sense to participate in mock interviews at your school's career center. In addition, ask two friends to help you practice. Take turns having one person interview and the other one observe. 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 have only 20 minutes to secure a callback offer, so it is critical to learn how to get a lot of information across in a succinct manner.

OPENING NIGHT

Candidates can shoot themselves in the foot during the callback process by believing it is only the formal interviews 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 a.m. during a colossal document production.

This is also your opportunity to get a real feel for what it's like to work for that firm. Watch carefully. 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 partners and the associates, 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 making the rounds at each firm during callbacks.

MAKING A DECISION

With all your thoughtful preparation and careful execution, barring major catastrophes (or really bad grades), you should be the recipient of several offers from your preferred firms. How do you know which one is the right one? Most law students say they fall back on two primary factors when choosing their summer firms: geography and prestige. But when you think about it, these are not really appropriate criteria for making a long-term career decision.

Geography is important if you really can't imagine yourself far away from home or in unfamiliar territory, but most successful professionals today will need to move several times in their careers to achieve their goals. And prestige is useful if you want to hedge your bets by getting a known name on your résumé, 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 prestigious firm doesn't enhance your résumé.

The best way to make a decision is to assess the probability of being successful and satisfied in a particular firm: availability and strength of the practice area in which you are interested, senior and junior people you like and respect, the stability of the firm'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, active business development). These are the factors that are more likely to help you decide which firm is right for you.

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. 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. You should consider not just the number of hours required of associates, but also whether you can deal with a high level of pressure and stress.

Only you can decide if that sort of workplace fits your personality, interests, and professional goals. Good luck and happy hunting!

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