

Is this the job you want?



How to find the right fit – and then sell yourself in the interview



On the face of it, interviewing should not be all that difficult – particularly for lawyers. As members of a profession who primarily make their living either writing or speaking, the idea that having a conversation about your interests and abilities in your own profession sounds both logical and easy.

But throw the words “job interview” into the mix and a whole new paradigm emerges. With seemingly so much at stake, job interviews take on a new meaning for people who ordinarily would not shy away from talking about the field they have chosen and the background that they bring.

At the same time, it also seems that candidates often appear at interviews unprepared for a conversation in which they have voluntarily decided to participate.

Here are some thoughts about making the most of a difficult process, and in the end making good decisions about where you want to work.

Preparation is key

Although you are, hopefully, going to be doing most of the talking in the interview, it pays to know as much as you can about the firm with whom you are interviewing, and the people who will be interviewing you. When you schedule the interview make sure to ask lots of questions. Whom will you be meeting with, how long will the interview last, and will the interview be a series of one-on-one conversations or a group meeting? There is a huge difference between those two kinds of interviews, and you want to be prepared for the one that you are going to have.

While most law firm interviews feature relatively standard questions, corporations now often employ what are called “behavioural” or “situational” interviews. These rely on the premise that past behaviour

predicts future performance. To that end, candidates are queried at length in a series of statements that start with, “tell me about a time when,” followed by a series of situations that range from your best moments to your worst.

You may not believe that this is the best way to learn how you will perform in the new position – but not being prepared to deal with this format can be fatal. And coming up with your best answers to these situational questions on the way home in the car is not going to do you any good.

The best way to prepare is to know the content of your resume completely, and to be able to talk, in specifics, about how you have approached work situations in the past. Whether or not you find yourself in an interview of this type, it helps significantly to prepare the stories that you want to talk about in advance. Your interviewers are likely to forget about your past titles and dates: But you do not want them to forget your stories. Whatever you do, resist the temptation to “wing it” when it comes to preparing your answers to questions about your past experience.

The SAO formula

There is an easy formula to employ when talking about what you have done – SAO – or Situation, Action, Outcome.

You want to describe succinctly the situation in which you found yourself, remembering that the listener may not know anything about the topic you are describing; include the actions that you took, and what happened as a result of your action.

Remember that in addition to winning circumstances, you are likely to be asked about times when you did not finish a project, meet expectations, or win a case. You may also be asked about difficult relationships with co-workers or supervisors. Having something prepared in advance is likely to prevent you from leading with an

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inappropriate story, or one that leaves the listener with a less than positive impression. While it is fine that you made mistakes in the past, you want the interviewer to know that whatever lesson was to be learned, you have done so and you will never make the same mistakes again.

Knowing who you are going to be meeting with gives you the opportunity to be well versed in their background prior to the interview. In addition to any posted firm or company biography, make sure that you look at their LinkedIn profile, any appropriate lawyer directories, court filings, and of course, the grapevine. The more you know about the temperaments and background of those interviewing you, the greater the likelihood that you will hit the right tone during the interview process.

Questions to ask and when

There are two sides to the interview process, and it is an important distinction to keep in focus. If during the interview you believe that the hiring entity has all of the power in the process, you may subtly signal a lack of confidence in your own value. However, you must understand that the early stages of the interview process are all about what you are bringing to the table. It is not until the other side begins to signal an interest in your candidacy that you can begin to ask questions about the ways in which this employer might be a good place for you to apply your skills.

Most interviewers will ask if you have any questions – which of course you do. But there are some questions that should be asked no sooner than when a job offer has been tendered. It is then and only then that you have leverage in the interview process.

Questions you ask during the interview process should relate specifically to the job: The kinds of things that you would be doing, the experience the interviewer is looking for, and what would make someone successful in the job. If you can get a description of a successful candidate, you can go on to reiterate to the interviewer why you would be just such a candidate.

Questions about the culture of the firm, the reasons the position is available, working hours and conditions, and possible advancement should be left until after a job offer. So should any discussion of salary and benefits. Many potential employers will ask you for salary requirements; but answering those questions short of a job offer is likely to short circuit your ability to negotiate on your own behalf when an offer is made. When asked – and you will be – politely tell the interviewer that you will be more than happy to discuss salary at the time of a job offer. If you get pushback, and it is possible that you will, reiterate your willingness to talk about the issue after an offer, and that you are at present primarily interested in learning more about the job and how you would be an asset to the organization.

If you are asked to complete a written application that includes salary history, write something narrative like: “within range for experience,” or “market rate.” If you have to include numbers, try to fill in the blank with zeros.

Benefits & working conditions

When an offer has been made, refrain from discussing salary until you have received full disclosure of the benefits package. Without that information you will not be able to know what you want to negotiate in the employment package.

If at all possible, have the salary conversation in person. If a number is delivered to you over the phone, set up a meeting to talk about the offer in person. Understand that you must be clear about the salary you are willing to accept. Remember as well that this is a negotiation on behalf of your first client – yourself. As an attorney, negotiation is likely to be part of your job requirements, so you should demonstrate that ability now.

There are a number of other things that you may want to discuss prior to talking about remuneration. Now is the time to talk about working conditions, billable hour numbers and rates if they are applicable, opportunities for advancement, partner track, marketing support, fee-splits, and firm culture, just to name a few.

This would also be a time when you want to meet more of your potential future colleagues, and see the physical office space you would occupy if you haven't already. While taking any job has its risks, you are at this point trying to eliminate as many future surprises as possible.

So borrow a page out of the prospective employer's interview guide. The firm doing the hiring will probably want references from you to ensure that you are who you say you are. Now's the time for you to gather some of the same kind of information from the firm by meeting and talking with more people. Just as you have been asked about your weaknesses or shortcomings, now you may also want to ask the firm about issues they are working on to improve.

Remember as well that no job (and no candidate) looks better than the day before you start. If you see red flags now, you may want to consider whether or not this is the best fit. Just because you have successfully made a case for yourself in the interview doesn't necessarily mean this is the job you want to own.

Due diligence on both parts of the interview is likely to create a better chance of a good fit – for you and the hiring firm. ■

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