



ATTORNEY SEARCH

BY JAMES FANT

### NON-ATTORNEYS AS LEGAL RECRUITERS

One of the little known secrets of the legal recruiting industry is that a select few are not, in fact, attorneys. For some, this is deeply unsettling: how could a person who never attended law school, passed the bar, or billed 2500 hours a year at a top firm, possibly understand, help or even deserve to play a role in the legal profession? In this view, a legal recruiter without a law degree is at best a poseur, at worst a rank amateur. One could imagine Woody Allen in Zelig sitting in a partners' meeting, nodding gravely in a hiring strategy discussion, despite not having finished high school, or even knowing what a law is.

I have to confess sympathy for this prejudice, and prejudice it is, despite being a legal recruiter sans law degree myself. In my business career prior to joining BCG Attorney Search, I stumbled across countless individuals and organizations who felt entitled, for one reason or another, to get something from me without ever having earned the right to it. Invariably, the root of my irritation was that the guilty party wanted something for nothing. That's not cricket, I thought. Some of the transgressors seemed to draw their peculiar sense of entitlement from their educational or other pedigrees, and had scant concern for helping me. For instance, I once sat in on a presentation in which a fairly successful businessman was trying to win my business. Rather than taking the time to listen, to try to understand my needs, and explain how his firm could help us, he went through a litany of degrees that he had earned at various schools, and a long, anesthetizing discussion of the syllabi he had completed at the various programs. You could call this presenter a salesman with a tin ear, a simple buffoon, or even, based on the torture that we endured, a sociopath - but he was (unconsciously) on to something. Understanding needs and getting results is still not the acid test in many people's minds when working with a recruiter. Getting the best results should have primacy. Pedigree can be very important in the legal profession, and in life, for a number of reasons beyond the scope of this article, but in legal recruiting, it's arguably less so. The question should be 'What can you do for me?' The proof of the pudding should be in the eating, viz, helping you get the job that you dreamed of, and helping law firms get the ideal new associates and partners that they seek.

Agents in Hollywood are often (justly) held to scorn by creative people for not understanding, in an even shallow manner, the artists that they represent - for being, in effect, predatory intermediaries. Yet despite this bad rap, the best agents are highly sought after, and many aspiring actors and writers would practically rip out and hand over one or both of their kidneys if that would secure their representation, and if they could physically reach that part of their backs. And some of those agents would probably happily accept such a bribe if they legally could, and, perhaps, sell the bleeding organs on eBay. What gives?

### Security is in the product

General Douglas MacArthur famously defined security as the ability to produce. But it is possible to go a step further, and put this in context: the mark of a successful legal recruiter is the ability to produce optimal results for you in your job search. What else, by comparison, matters? LSAT scores? (Confession: I have never even taken the LSAT).

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### Why join a club that wouldn't have me as a member?

A corollary of Groucho's famous dictum would seem to apply here. Why would someone want to join an industry in which they were never previously a member, other than for crass commercial reasons? This is perhaps a question for the ages but I am happy to answer it in my own case, however unrepresentative it may be.

I grew up in what could be termed a legal household. Talk of the latest batch of summer associates, pending cases, and the slings and arrows of outrageous clients was practically mother's milk to me. But I made the decision not to be an attorney very early, supposedly at the age of three, when asked by a family friend if I would be a lawyer "like my daddy," and I indicated that, no, I hadn't taken the LSAT yet and had no plans to do so. Whether this was the result of genetic drift or a deeply rebellious streak does not matter. But the truth is, I have always been drawn to the law like a moth to the flame. For Robert Duvall in *Apocalypse Now*, the smell of napalm in the morning was a stimulant, for me, the smell of a conference room on a Saturday morning, littered with coffee cups and half-eaten danishes and even, in those halcyon days before ordinances about secondary smoke, cigars in ashtrays was exhilarating. Or at least I remember it that way.

When I was an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, I spent a term abroad at Oxford University. One of my professors arranged for me to work in a barrister's office for the summer at the Royal Inns of Court. He was a Queen's Counsel, a 'silk,' and had a case he was arguing before the House of Lords when I arrived. I researched and wrote memoranda summarizing various motions and pleadings, and drank tea with the chambers every day at 4pm, feeling very much at home. It was as though I was transported into the fictional world of John Mortimer's Rumpole of the Old Bailey, but I didn't pretend to be anything other than I was: a college student. In fact, I established precedent by being the only mini-pupil (a sort of summer associate) who was not studying law. I was, as one waggish member of the chambers termed it, a "quasi-mini pupil."

But I am not a quasi-mini recruiter, because such a thing simply cannot exist, except perhaps in an Austin Powers movie. Like Avis, I have to try harder. One of the most exciting things about this industry is that it is entirely knowledge-based. But the knowledge that you need to become a legal recruiter is not, strictly speaking, taught in law school, during clerkships, or at law firms.

The knowledge it takes to be a successful legal recruiter is gained through practical experience and very hard work, meeting with firms, understanding their cultures and practices, and advocating on behalf of candidates to help them get the best jobs they possibly can. In my case, it has been gained by learning from one of the top legal recruiters in the country, the CEO of this firm, who was willing to take me on board and mentor me. It is gained by being a hedgehog, in philosophy if not in appearance, which is such a rare creature that it is a protected species in Great Britain. A hedgehog is an animal with a singular focus, and like my talented colleagues here who are attorneys, we are all striving for the same thing, which is to do the very best possible job we can through relentless focus and constantly working at becoming better recruiters.

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#### Doctor, heal thyself

As has been discussed elsewhere on this site, legal recruiters are sometimes dismissed as failed attorneys. Some of them undoubtedly are. Others, though, aren't, and have simply found a way to use the skills they developed as attorneys to create greater value for law firms and candidates than they ever could billing out an hourly rate as associates or even as partners. Their satisfaction comes from helping people get jobs, and their passion is simply a reflection of their success in doing that.

The truth is that having a law degree, while extremely useful and worthwhile, and an excellent start to becoming a legal recruiter, is no more predictive of success as a legal recruiter than is having a hernia operation. The army of failed attorney-recruiters is a sad testament to that. But there is one species of legal recruiter to beware of, and that is the person who feels entitled to work with you purely as a result of what he or she has done in the past and not for what he or she will do for you today; in other words, the belief that he or she deserves to represent you without putting in the extremely hard work that the legal recruiting industry requires. Unlike a hedgehog and more like a peacock, such a recruiter will flourish his or her feathers but at the end of the day, that won't help you get the job that you want and need. Avoid this species of recruiter like the plague.

On the other hand, BCG Attorney Search has carefully built up its reputation over several years through present accomplishments, not only past glories.

#### Other considerations

Besides getting results, the sine qua non of any effective recruiter, there are other, "softer" yet still important aspects of legal recruiting germane to this discussion. While I believe they are secondary, they are nevertheless important.

An excellent recruiter is more than someone who merely gets you a job. She is also, in many cases, a trusted advisor, a listening ear; someone who can empathize with and understand, on a profound level, the situation of the candidates that she represents. And here I must admit something that I can never quite overcome: I have never been in your exact situation. Yes, I have been overworked and underappreciated, yes, pulling all-nighters in college and graduate school, sweating through interviews, or trying and succeeding to move to a more congenial part of the country, or the world, but I haven't practiced law at an AmLaw 100 firm.

If that is what is most important to you, then shoot me. No, actually what I will do is I will refer you to one of my many colleagues who have done that. However, I will say in passing that the advisors we come to know and trust, the service professionals that we seek out in a variety of industries, are not simply effective commiserators, or recovering former associates who have become agony aunts, but people who are objective and empathetic. You don't seek out a surgeon who has broken his arm to get orthopedic surgery, but one who is a true expert, and a consummate professional.

Every day I work hard at being both.

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#### [The business of legal recruiting](#)

The legal profession is many things, but at its heart it is a business. As the latest recession has proven, law firms are not insulated or isolated from broad macroeconomic trends, or microeconomic profitability considerations. Unprecedented layoffs, partnership dissolutions, and a massive fall-off in corporate work have driven this reality home to many who considered the law to be a safe haven from the slings and arrows of the outrageous economy.

What does this have to do with legal recruiting? The answer is, plenty. In fact, a few of the most famous recruiters in the United States are not attorneys. The reason is simple: they approach the challenge of recruiting as the profession that it is, rather than as a frivolous sideshow of the law. They are business people that put a premium on client relationships and satisfaction. As a result, law firms pay close attention when they send candidates over for consideration.

In my career to date, I have conducted business in over 25 countries, hired dozens of people, helped build millions of dollars of revenue, and lived abroad for several years. During that time, I have gone over at least a thousand resumes, three hundred interviews, and even hired a prestigious law firm in the Bay Area for my last company. This process gave me quite a bit of insight into what makes a good employee and how to conduct yourself when you are looking for a job. Most recruiters, attorneys or not, have not made numerous hiring decisions themselves, and have not been forced to live with the consequences of a bad match. Hiring decisions are literally among the most important that a firm can make. Because many candidates have not been through large numbers of interviews in their careers, and in many cases are more familiar with the specialized kinds of interviews that they encountered in law school, it is important to work with someone who can guide you through the process of getting a job in an expert fashion.

### Thinking 'outside the box'

While this may come as a surprise to many, the quality of a recruiter is directly a result of the quality of thinking that he or she does, and the action taken based on that thinking. If the concept of a thinking recruiter sounds oxymoronic, if not downright humorous, then you have had the experience that so many attorneys have had with recruiters who are essentially on autopilot, or worse. Nevertheless, it is important that you consider the ramifications of not working with a thinking recruiter.

For example, suppose you were considering relocating, and you had the choice of working with someone who was merely going to call a few firms in your target area and pray for the best, or someone who would actually spend time actively listening to you, even challenging some of the assumptions you might have made, and developing a strategy based on your peculiar strengths generated by Socratic discussion. Furthermore, if a recruiter functions as a drone, or an automatic toaster, and merely spends each day popping out resumes to the "usual suspects," you are almost certainly missing out on opportunities you may not be aware of. It takes a kind of scrappiness, an entrepreneurial approach, to make sure that no stone is unturned in your search.

Whom would you rather work with?

Changing a job is one of the most important things that you can do in your life. Attorney-recruiters, while hard-working and often brilliant, do not have a monopoly on this type of thinking process.

### Conclusions

It is easy to dismiss legal recruiters who are non-attorneys. But to do so risks limiting the options you have, and, more important, missing out on working with me.

I believe that it stems from a misapprehension about the role of a legal recruiter. In essence, you should choose a recruiter not for what she has done in the past, but for what she can do for you now. As one of the few non-attorney recruiters at BCG Attorney Search, I believe I speak for all of us when I say that that is how we would like to be judged. And based on the large volume of placements that we make, and satisfied customers that we have, our ability to get things done puts us at the pinnacle of the legal recruiting industry.