BRIDGING THE GAP: A LAW FIRM “INSIDER’S PERSPECTIVE” FOR LAW STUDENTS

BY TIFFANY WOOD

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It doesn’t take a crystal ball to predict that on-campus recruiting is likely to be different in 2009 than it was in 2008, and remarkably different from what we experienced in 2007 – for legal employers and law schools certainly, but especially for law students. Many legal employers are still evaluating their long-term recruiting strategies in light of the lay-offs and deferred offers experienced across the industry over the past 12 to 18 months. In Donna Gerson’s article entitled “The Times They Are A-Changin’: Suggestions for Law Schools in Changing Times” in the April 2009 *NALP Bulletin*, the first suggestion for law schools was an important piece of advice: Educate students.

As a law firm recruiting manager, my first thought after reading that suggestion was, “Wow! What a big task.” After law students receive information about the state of the legal market, particularly with respect to law firm hiring, they’ll probably feel discouraged. Some students might decide not to pursue interviews with law firms at all, even if they’re interested in the type of work a firm environment could offer. Other students will see opportunity in the challenge. For the students who want law firm summer associate positions, I’m certain that my law school colleagues will do what they can to help them realize that goal.

After more thought, I wondered how we, on the law firm side of the equation, might be most helpful to our colleagues in career services as we prepare for recruiting season. One way we can assist is to provide them with an “insider’s perspective” by sharing our own advice for law students as well as advice from our hiring partners.

At most law firms, the hiring partners devote a substantial amount of time to recruiting but are also quite busy with the actual practice of law and client obligations. In many cases, recruiting administrators serve as “gatekeepers” for our hiring partners – screening résumés and fielding phone calls but also seeking information from them and passing it along when needed.

In this article, I’ll share some perspectives I gathered from recruiting professionals and hiring partners, as well as their advice for law students who will be interviewing this fall. Suspecting that this type of “insider” advice would be of even more interest to law students now than in previous years, I posed the following questions to a sampling of hiring partners and recruiting administrators at major international law firms, some of which are among the AmLaw Top 100 firms. Their responses follow.

WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PIECE OF ADVICE YOU’D GIVE TO A SECOND-YEAR LAW STUDENT BEFORE ON-CAMPUS INTERVIEWS THIS FALL?

- “In this economic climate, I think that flexibility on the part of second-year law students is paramount. By this I mean regional flexibility in terms of where to start a career, flexibility as to considering government, nonprofit, and smaller law firms instead of flocking only to larger corporate law firms, and flexibility as to areas of practice. Firms will increasingly be making hiring decisions based on specific practice group needs, and if a student keeps an open mind, he or she might be more likely to succeed in landing an offer.”

– Hiring Partner in Washington, DC
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**How can a student get “on your radar” if they’re not at a law school where your firm will be going on campus?**

- “Utilize all of your resources to help make connections. Reach out to alumni and attend events at your law school where alumni or guest speakers will be present. Attend events hosted by bar associations and other professional networks. When an attorney at our firm refers a candidate, it helps them stand out among the pool of applications we receive each day.” – Recruiting Manager in Washington, DC

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**If a student is unable to secure a summer associate position with a law firm, what type of summer experience would your firm find most valuable to stand out on a future application?**

- “An internship at a court, regulatory agency or with a public interest organization usually provides solid legal experience while also demonstrating an interest in working hard and learning about a specific area of law.” – Hiring Partner in Washington, DC

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**Given that on-campus interviews might be more competitive than in past years, do you have any tips or suggestions for how to make the best possible first impression with an on-campus interviewer?**

- “In a time when firms have a very limited number of callback interview invitations to extend, the on-campus interviewers will place more importance on whether the student has a genuine and demonstrable interest in their firm. Why do they want to come here? Students will need to articulate specific reasons for their interest in the firm, such as knowing something about the firm, the range of the firm’s practice areas, the type of clients the firm represents, and the structure of the firm’s summer associate program. Each firm is different, so candidates will need to target their research for each interview.” – Hiring Partner in Washington, DC

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“Showing that you can more quickly add value by having the experience or the academic background to immediately assist a firm in a specific practice area will help you to stand out from other candidates (e.g., technical, business, science experience/degrees). Select a firm that has the practice you want and sell your credentials directly to a partner who practices in the area.” – Firmwide Recruiting Supervisor in San Francisco, CA