

Launching Your Legal Career: A Common Sense Primer on Job Search for 1Ls

F. Scott Kieff

Professor of Law
The George Washington University Law School

Framing about You

- You are in charge (to blame?)
- You are selling the best product you know (it's you!)
- You are best informed about it
 - A blessing because you know the good stuff
 - A curse because others need to be educated
 - A curse because nobody likes being rejected (your biggest enemy comes from within – anxiety)
- Two step process
 - (1) get offers
 - (2) make choices
 - Never mix up order of the steps!

Framing about Them

- Remember Lucy and Ethel at the candy factory?
- Not like other interactions
 - “No” means nothing
 - Nothing other than an “offer” means much of anything, other than any express statements about process (follow those)
- What are they looking for? An FBU
- What are they looking to avoid? Problems
- You want to find those who make and influence decisions
- You want to empower them to decide or advocate for you

Framing about this Discussion

- These are one guy's views
 - Not those of the school
 - Yet great thanks are due to Carole Montgomery, Cindy Tewksbury, and Kevin Motsinger
- They suggest a great deal of work, exposure, rejection
- They have been time tested from both sides many times
- They work, very well

Where Do You Look?

- Exclude:
 - anywhere that you are certain,
 - based on good information,
 - based on a reasonable prediction about terms they'd offer,
 - will not work for your personal and professional needs
- Include – everywhere else
- Remember the order – why select what you don't have or don't know you can get?

When Do You Look?

- 1L – Launch in December and January (finish exams first)
(GW's Career Development Office is open over break to help)
- 2L (etc) – Launch in August through October
- Always prepare
- Always persist (marathon not sprint)

Who Do you Contact?

- Think of “mini me” – any lawyer who will see in you something you see in them
- Find them all and contact them all
- Also contact hiring partner, recruiting coordinator, etc
- How do you know?
 - Organization’s own web pages
 - Personal “I love me” pages
 - Westlaw “WLD” directory
 - Lexis “marhub” directory
 - NALP and other directories

How Do You Collect Data?

- Build a mail merge template and data set
 - Template is cover letter
 - Data set can be a Word table, an Excel spreadsheet, an Outlook data file, etc.
- Gather contact info like name, address, salutation, etc.
- Include a targeted clause or sentence for your cover letter
- Include notes on other ties, jargon, deadlines, etc.
- Aim for several hundred individuals (note: school is important)
- This is work for TV time, late night, or other off time
- Save these from year to year and build them in between

What Stays out of the Cover Letter?

- Self sponsored statements of praise
 - You are not a particularly well qualified witness
 - You are a biased witness (and it makes you look pompous)
- Overstated preferences of location, job, etc.
- You picked them because they are good at X (kissing up)
- A discussion or analysis of something interesting (save this for a writing sample)
- “Feel free” or “do not hesitate” (they have the power and you don’t want them to think that you think that you have the power)
- A promise to call, visit, etc. (make the call; just not the promise)
- “I look forward to hearing from you” (high expectations or demanding)
- Typos, mistakes, etc.

What Goes in the Cover Letter?

- Proper salutation using titles (research is important here)
- ¶1: “I am a (status) student at George Washington University School of Law interested in working as a (job title) at (organization) in (time frame).”
- ¶1-2: “Having enjoyed (self promoting experience) I would particularly enjoy joining (be especially excited to join) your (label selected from their materials) group/department/practice/team.”
- ¶2: optional
- ¶3: “I enclose a copy of my resume and hope you will please let me know if I may provide any additional information. I look forward to the possibility of joining your team.”
- ¶3: Perhaps thank them for their time and consideration
- “Sincerely”
- “Enclosure(s): resume (and list of references)”

What Could be in ¶2?

- One statement of geographic tie or preference (avoid overstatements and over commitments)
- One direct narrative to tell a short, important story that shoes something good about you in a way that is professionally relevant to the reader
 - Any self praise must be indirect, gentle, almost hidden
 - Use passive voice
 - Place in a linguistically parenthetical clause (not actually in parentheses) or at the beginning of a sentence that will end strong and that comes after a sentence that ended strong
 - “Having enjoyed my work for X years doing _____, for which I was awarded _____.”
 - “I majored in ___/I chose ___ because I enjoy/wanted _____ ...”
 - Directly and convincingly tie to something that really matters to the reader
 - “... I would be particularly excited to work with (hit the ground running as a member of) your ___ group
- Only mention the “mini-me” linker if subtle and appropriate
- If you have only one discrete item to mention here, then append it to the end of ¶1; if you have two or more then place them together in ¶2

How to Prepare a Worksheet for ¶2?

- Build a list of the great things from your past
 - “Worked 3yrs in finance”; “supervised 5 person staff”; “managed \$\$ budget”; “held press conferences and other PR events”;
- Build a list that places these each into separate clauses that report a historical fact or a personal preference (these are less awkward ways of saying you are great)
 - “Having especially enjoyed my college finance (or debate, etc...) class, for which I earned an A,....”
- Build a list that links each of those to clauses that will professionally matter to the reader
 - “I would be particularly interested in your corporate (or litigation, etc...) group...”
- Then try some of these in your ¶2 and see if they read well in context
- Remember: you are in charge and you want to show you are invested; so don’t ask a career services professional or a faculty member for help revising your cover letter until you have taken the time to make several drafts yourself and then be sure to bring along your worksheet of draft clauses

How to Spot Cover Letter Pitfalls?

I am a first-year student at Duke University School of Law and am interested in obtaining a position with your firm for the Summer of 2006. Upon my graduation from Duke Law School, I plan to return to the Boston area where I grew up and where my family resides. Choate, Hall & Stewart attracted my attention because of its excellent and broad-based reputation for litigation practice in Boston.

I believe that I am a strong candidate for a summer associate position. While in college at Boston University, I served as a writer and editor for our school newspaper, *The Chronicle*. Through this experience, I developed strong writing skills and learned to communicate effectively with fellow writers and members of the college community. I have continued to develop my research and writing skills while participating in Duke's First-Year Legal Research and Writing Course. This semester I am preparing a memorandum analyzing the law of false imprisonment, and next semester I will draft an appellate brief. I hope to continue developing my oral advocacy skills by competing in Duke's moot court program next semester.

I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to meet with you personally to further discuss my qualifications, and I am planning to be in Boston the week of December 18. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

What Are the Letter's Logistics?

- Format, font, etc. should be conservative, traditional
- Paper should be off-white, ivory (confirm compatibility with printer and post office)
- Matching paper for resume, envelope, etc. (also match contact info)
- On resume or on separate sheet include 2-4 references with name, title, phone, email, (plus link to you if not obvious)
- Send paper original, first class mail
- Save PDF for follow up email
- Can prepare well in advance (send when appropriate)

What Pointers for Your Resume?

- Only include info that helps your case
- Everything positioned in best, accurate light
- Consider GPA's or rankings: B+ = 3.168+
- Short active voice declarations to report tasks, skills, accomplishments: “Developed __, wrote __, represented __, supervised __, directed __, served on/as __, awarded __, selected __”
- Look to trim excess words
- Chose simple synonyms: “helped v. assisted, used v. utilized”
- Rehearse short story(ies) for every item (clause/word)
- Conflicts between color and crit (e.g., interest in travel)

Who Are Your References/Referees?

- Someone who can and will sing your praises based on good information
- Someone who won't sing your shortcomings
- A law professor
- A boss
- A professor from prior education

How Do You Interact with Referees?

- Ask them in advance: “I am applying for ___ and wonder whether you would be willing to serve as a positive reference for me? I expect that this will involve taking a call/replying to an email/writing a letter (as best as you can predict).”
- If letters are required, be sure to give them all the logistics support you can imagine being helpful (addresses, due dates, addressee names and titles, mechanics of delivery, etc).
- Be sure to let referees know about each other
- Be sure to give them all ammunition
- Be sure to let them know what you eventually decide to do from the process

How Do You Follow Up after Letters?

- Before you plan to be in their location (you can arrange that)
- Before an important (to them) deadline
- After some important (to them) news (you got your grades and they are all A's, you got an offer from a competitor, etc)
- Send them a short email with a short statement about the above point or points added to the first paragraph and include the PDF of the original letter and attachments
- A few days later follow up again with a phone call (leave voice mail)

How Do You Prepare for a Meeting (Interview)?

- Request names of people you will meet and schedule
- Research the people you will meet and their host organization
- Look up words, concepts you don't know
- Plan travel route and method
- Practice, practice, practice (style, stories, poses, etc)
- Be gracious to everyone involved in the process including staff, friends, competitors, etc.
- Arrive early
- Read literature they set out for visitors to remember jargon, learn news, etc.
- Dress conservatively, bring only one slim portfolio with several copies of your resume, references, anything requested, note cards or paper, two pens

How Do You Interview?

- Focus on your mission – to convince them they want to hire you
- Be happy and enthusiastic about everything – be human
- Focus on substance, work
- Think Donahue interview with moving baton mic.
- When they talk you rest, gather thoughts, let them (help them) enjoy themselves
- Everything you say is about selling you to them
- Everything they say is about helping you frame what to say next
- Every question you ask is about letting them talk, gathering information for you to use in the interview, looking good (smart, prepared, insightful, etc)
- Every question they ask is an opportunity for you to answer in a way that shows something good about you (and avoids anything bad or awkward)
- Jot notes in between interviews for thank you letters later
- OK to either repeat points or to spread across interviews
- Afterwards ask admin contact for list of names for everyone you met

What are Some Interview Pitfalls?

- Don't appear to be (or suggest that you will be)
 - needy, demanding, judging, in control, etc
 - uninterested, uninteresting, offensive, too easily offended, etc
 - Too distant, too close
- Avoid talking trash about anyone or any organization
- Avoid politics, religion, sex, etc

What are Some OK Interview Questions You May Be Asked?

- “What interests you in this law firm/organization/region?”
- “How did you like school? How did you do/what’s your GPA?”
- “Why did you chose that school? What was your favorite course during school?”
- “Tell me about your participation on the journal/in your clinical program. Describe your thesis/research project/note/prior job further”
- “Why did you choose the extracurricular activities you did? What did you gain? What did you contribute?”
- “Why did you chose to become a lawyer? What qualities do you believe will make you a successful lawyer?”
- “What goals have you set for yourself? How are you planning to achieve them?”
- “How would you describe the ideal summer/permanent job?”
- “Tell me how your supervisor from your summer internship would describe you”
- “What was the most useful criticism you ever received, and who was it from?”
- “What skills have you developed as a result of your experience?”
- “Describe the project or situation that best demonstrated your analytical skills”
- “Tell me about an idea you have developed and implemented that was particularly creative or innovative”

What are Some Tricky Interview Questions You May Be Asked?

- “Tell me about yourself?”
- “What are your weaknesses?”
- “What are your strengths?”
- “Why should we hire you?”
- “What will you be doing 5 (or 10) years from now?”
- “Why aren’t your grades better?”
- “What’s the biggest mistake you ever made?”
- “What kind of salary are you looking for?”
- “Who else are you interviewing with?”
- Hypothetical questions (e.g., what would you do if, etc.)
- Philosophical questions (if you were a tree...)
- Let’s discuss your family background
- Illegal questions
- For them all, practice gentle ways to reply pleasantly and seemingly directly while actually guiding conversation to safe points about you – avoid losing points and score some!

What are Some Safe Interview Questions for You to Ask ?

- Anything that leads to your showing them your ability to help them meet their needs, agenda, etc.
- “What kind of people do best in your group?” (that’s great because I’m ...)
- “How do you arrange your teams?” (that’s great because I enjoy...)
- “I saw that you (your group/team) handled the ___ matter. What type of work were you doing on that project; what are some things you enjoyed most about it?”

What are Some Unsafe Interview Questions for You to Ask? (avoid these)

- Anything about your needs, agenda, etc. Anything that will help you make a decision about what offer to accept.
- “Why did you choose (What attracted you) to work at this firm? What type of work do you do? What do you see as the benefits/drawbacks of working at a firm your size? What type of client base does the firm have?”
- “Are the offices independent? Is there a shared client base? How are your groups/departments organized? Where do junior lawyers fit in?”
- “What opportunity is there for promotion within the organization? Are there any possibilities of intra/inter-agency transfers? How often will I be reviewed for salary increases or promotions? What promotions can I expect in the next two or three years? What will a typical career pattern look like?”
- “Do you expect growth in your practice/department? How much and in what areas? What are your attrition rates?”
- “How is your summer associate program structured? How many summer associates do you plan to hire? What type of projects/assignments do summer associates receive? Do you allow split summers?”
- “Is there a chance for involvement in client meetings? Depositions? Hearings? What type of evaluation/feedback process do you have?”
- “How soon can I expect to hear from you if an offer is to be made?”
- “If I receive an offer for permanent employment, will it remain open through the period of my judicial clerkship? What about a two-year clerkship?”
- “If I accept a position with your firm following my clerkship, will my standing be the same as other new recruits, or will I receive “credit” toward partnership because of my clerkship?”

How/Which Offer

Do You Decide to Accept?

- Only after you have an offer and only when needed
- Only after an offer can you ask about hours, salary, who you will work with, etc.
- Assess personal needs
- Assess work environment (which few people will be your bosses, colleagues)
- Assess type of work
 - Prestige
 - Opportunity to thrive (get an offer)
 - Preferences for field and type of practice
 - Opportunity to spend time on task, develop skills
 - Salary, location, etc.

How Do You Approach Work?

- Duties of care & loyalty to client to work hard, solve problems, in their interest
- Duty to boss, team, etc, to be eager service provider
- Pick up, hand off, mark-up, deliver, wait, ask gently and move on if unanswered, make and explain informed guesses, take initiative,
- Time on task is single best way to build your skill set and experience set (transferrable human capital)
- Look to grow human capital (monitor conflict memos)
- Bonus, etc is far from focus (maybe also salary)
- Don't believe the hype (job is not for your short term needs, firm doesn't work for you)
- You are the keeper of your reputation, skills, experiences, etc
- Take pleasure in your work but don't "have fun"
- Build good collegial relationships, network (few friendships)
- Get good reviews, get offer to return

How to Think about Billable Hours?

- Focus on your own human capital
- 2,000 hrs is not onerous
 - 200 hrs/mo x 10 mo's (that's 2 mo's off/yr)
 - 50 hrs/wk
 - 10hrs /day with weekends off
(figure 8 am – 7pm with 1hr lost)
 - 8 hrs /day weekdays with 5hr/day on weekend
 - Compare medical interns, residents, fellows (first 4-10 yrs, at tiny salaries, with real life and death stressors)
 - Compare peace corps and military (hours and pay like doctors with real life and death stressors that also impact themselves!)

How to Approach Early Career Decisions?

- Focus on substance of work and human capital
- Focus on learning about profession
- Prefer skills, then prestige, then salary
- Seek out mentors, don't expect them
- Plan near term only – your understanding, ideas, preferences, needs, opportunities, etc. will all change, and so will the world around you
- Look to thrive, and you will!