

An Insider's Guide to Interviewing:

Insights from the Employer's Perspective

Hiring attorneys share inside advice on:

- ★ The qualities of a winning résumé
- ★ What impresses most and least
- ★ Interviewers' favorite questions
- ★ Employers' hiring criteria
- ★ Questions interviewees should ask
- ★ The offer process
- ★ Criteria for selecting an employer



NALP

"... The more energy you bring to interviewing, the more likely you are to emerge with a job that will lead to a truly satisfying career."



1025 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 1110
Washington, DC 20036-5413
Phone: (202) 835-1001 ■ Fax: (202) 835-1112

www.nalp.org — www.nalpdirectory.com
www.pslawnet.org

© 2004 National Association for Law Placement, Inc.
Revised 3rd edition

Prologue

Turning the Tables

Have you ever wished you could turn the tables on interviewers and ask such questions as:

- How do hiring attorneys decide which résumés rate interviews?
- What does an employer want to find out about you during an interview?
- What impresses an interviewer most — and least?
- How important is it that you ask questions of your interviewer?
Are some questions “off limits”?
- What special “inside” advice do interviewers wish they could impart to interviewees?

The NALP Counseling Concerns Committee posed exactly these questions — and more — to 35 hiring attorneys across the country. The hiring attorneys interviewed represent a broad cross-section of the legal profession, including law firms of all sizes (from firms with fewer than ten attorneys to firms with more than 250 attorneys); public defenders' and district attorneys' offices; a government agency employing several hundred attorneys; legal services offices; and public interest organizations.

An Insider's Guide to Interviewing presents the collected insights of all of these hiring attorneys. It is addressed particularly to law students who are preparing for their first legal job interviews; however, more experienced attorneys will also benefit from this “inside” view of interviewing from the perspective of employers.

Reframing the Interview Experience

Too often interviews are viewed as one-way inquisitions. No wonder, then, that the mere thought of interviewing can cause sweaty palms and pounding hearts.

An Insider's Guide to Interviewing presents a broader picture of the interview process. The hiring attorneys whose advice is featured in this publication vary in their approaches to interviewing, but they were unanimous in their view that interviewing is a two-way street. An interview is not only an employer's opportunity to learn about a candidate but also the interviewee's opportunity to gather information that will lead to a more informed career decision.

Good News and Bad News

There is good news and bad news in the perspectives on interviewing shared by employers in the following pages. The "bad news" is that there is no magic list of answers that can be memorized to ensure interview success. In fact, "canned answers" were repeatedly cited by hiring attorneys as one of the surest ways to lose an employer's interest. The "good news" is that the interview experience is much less intimidating when viewed as a two-way dialogue.

More important, the interviewees who most impress employers are generally the candidates who gain the most themselves from the interview experience. Again and again, hiring attorneys told NALP that they are seeking "interested," "motivated" candidates — persons who have carefully considered their career paths and thoroughly researched the employers with whom they interview.

Reframing your interview experience as an integral part of the career planning process requires a commitment of considerable time and energy, but the more energy you bring to interviewing, the more likely you are to emerge with a job that will lead to a truly satisfying career. "If I were counseling students," noted a hiring attorney with a large law firm, "I would say, 'First try to understand yourself and what kinds of situations you want to work in, then, based on that, try to use the interview process to learn more about employers.'"

Interviews

Nuts and Bolts of the Process

If you are a law student interviewing with large law firms, you will probably participate in on-campus interviewing (often referred to as “OCI”). For employers, on-campus interviews are screening interviews. They are generally conducted by a single interviewer and are usually only 20-30 minutes in length. From the many (sometimes 1,000 or more) candidates who are interviewed on campus, a large law firm will select a limited number to invite for in-office interviews (often referred to as “callbacks” or “flybacks”). The in-office interview may be conducted by a single attorney or a small group of attorneys; often a lunch or other less formal opportunity to meet with a larger group of attorneys is included in the office visit.

Smaller law firms, public interest organizations, governmental agencies, and other legal employers vary in their approaches to the interview process. Employers who hire large numbers of candidates are likely to conduct initial screening interviews — either on-campus or in their offices — but some very small employers also visit one or more law schools for an initial round of interviews. Many of the relatively small law firms and public interest organizations contacted by NALP conduct only a single round of interviews, usually at their offices; telephone screening is sometimes used to narrow the pool of interviewees. Some employers and some law schools have also begun to use video conferencing in the interview process.

“... Ultimately, an interview is an opportunity to examine whether the candidate has something which sets him or her apart from the hundreds of other people we see during the interview season.”

The Big Picture from the Interviewer’s Perspective

What do hiring attorneys say they are trying to learn about you during an interview? Responses from a sampling of hiring attorneys follow.

- “We want to learn how interested they are in our firm and why they are interested,” said a hiring attorney with a large private firm. This comment was echoed by many of the hiring attorneys contacted.
- “In the first interview,” said a hiring attorney with a small law firm, “we try to size up the candidate as a person. Is he or she easy to talk to? Confident but not cocky, at ease, with good communication skills?” Hiring attorneys from both large and small law firms use the interview to discover whether the candidate is a “well-rounded person” with interests beyond the law.
- “The screening interview is a credentials check,” noted one recruiter from a large law firm.
- “The academic factor has been determined before the interview,” commented a hiring attorney with a small firm. “Fit is what we try to determine during the interview.”
- “A sense of motivation” is the primary quality many hiring attorneys are seeking. For public interest organizations this means a commitment not only to the specific employer but also to public service; legal services organizations and public defenders’ offices noted that they also consider the candidate’s ability to work with low income people.
- “Maturity and a sense of responsibility” are additional factors many recruiters try to assess during an interview.
- “Verbal and nonverbal communication skills” and the “ability to analyze and articulate issues” are viewed by many hiring attorneys as measures of a candidate’s ability to relate to colleagues and clients.
- An interviewer for a large firm noted that, ultimately, an interview is an opportunity to examine “whether the candidate has something which sets him or her apart from the hundreds of other people we see during the interview season.”

First Impressions Count

“The first five minutes can make or break you during an interview,” commented a hiring attorney from a large law firm who was interviewed by NALP. A hiring attorney from a small law firm added, “Studies have shown that you have as little as seven seconds to make an initial impression.”

While some interviewers reported that initial impressions were meaningless except in blatant instances of poor hygiene, unkempt appearance, or wildly inappropriate dress, most interviewers admitted that first impressions do count. “When someone walks in with a lot of confidence, that’s impressive,” said one employer; “if someone walks in seeming cocky and arrogant, that’s a turn-off.”

“We realize people are nervous and try to discount the nervousness,” commented another interviewer, “but if people can’t look you in the eye, it does make an impression.” Eye contact was frequently cited as an important characteristic of confident body language. “Poor handshakes are chalked up to nerves,” said one hiring attorney, “but points are deducted for failure to make direct eye contact.”

Some employers NALP interviewed are less willing to dismiss a “dead fish” handshake. “Avoid limp handshakes that express no enthusiasm,” counseled one hiring attorney, “but don’t overcompensate with an athletic handshake that nearly rips the interviewer’s elbow out of its socket.” Another employer put a different spin on the issue of handshakes. “Don’t think you’ve blown it initially because your hands are sweating and you’re a nervous wreck,” commented the employer. “Hopefully, by the end of the interview, you’ll be a little calmer. I wish that through reading this,” he went on to say, “law students would learn that interviewing is not that big a deal. It’s just getting to know each other.”

Sloppiness and inappropriate dress (i.e., shirt tail out or blue jeans) are two of the ways to guarantee an initial bad impression. “A candidate can’t be sloppy,” said one hiring attorney, “because that’s not somebody I can bring to a meeting with a client.” Another employer commented, “A business-like appearance is important because we’re hiring trial attorneys who must be conscious of image.” “Blatant sloppiness or unprofessional dress,” offered another employer, “makes me question the interviewee’s interest in making a favorable impression and whether he or she is in tune with the business world in which our firm operates.”

“When in doubt, dress conservatively,” advised one hiring attorney — although another hiring attorney noted that professional business attire need not be limited to the traditional blue suit. “After awhile,” commented this hiring attorney, “all those blue suits sort of run together.” In addition, several interviewers mentioned their aversion to strong colognes or perfumes on either men or women.

Making the Most of Time

Knowing that every moment counts, many nervous interviewees try to deflect small talk at the beginning of an interview — thereby missing a critical opportunity to establish rapport with the interviewer. Even during a brief 20-minute on-campus interview, most recruiters allot the first three to five minutes for introductions and ice-breaking — and the last three to five minutes for a closing and wind-up.

Again and again, interviewers contacted by NALP referred to interviews as conversations and stressed that the candidate’s ability to relate to the interviewer is as important as the answers provided. Interviewers are trying to evaluate a candidate’s ability to communicate with clients and colleagues. Initial moments of small talk offer an opportunity to find common ground; personal connections are often what make a candidate stand out among his or her peers in the interviewer’s memory.

“... Many nervous interviewees try to deflect small talk at the beginning of an interview — thereby missing a critical opportunity to establish rapport with the interviewer.”

A Few of Their Favorite Questions

The bulk of an interview is generally devoted to questions and answers. Approaches to questioning candidates vary tremendously among interviewers. Of all of the 35 hiring attorneys NALP contacted, only one — an interviewer for a government agency — reported liking to ask law-related interview questions. Several others indicated that they occasionally ask a question about a legal paper or research project if the topic is mentioned on the candidate's résumé.

In cases where interviewers ask law-related questions, they are less concerned with legal knowledge than with a candidate's ability to communicate legal issues clearly. "If I ask about a law review article," commented one hiring attorney, "I want to see if the candidate can explain the significance of the topic to me in plain English." Another interviewer, however, seemed to express the perspective of the majority of interviewers when he said, "I feel it is my responsibility to learn more about interviewees as persons rather than whether they can wing their way through a fascinating discussion of ERISA." "The academic factor has been determined before the interview," added another hiring attorney, "I'm trying to find out what type of person the interviewee is and why he or she is interested in our firm."

NALP asked interviewers to list their favorite questions. Some of their responses follow. The questions and comments listed here do not necessarily represent the best possible questions — and they may not be the questions you encounter in your interviews. However, these real-life examples of interviewers' favorite questions provide insights regarding a variety of interview techniques.

- "‘Why are you interested in this firm?’ is my all-time favorite question," said one hiring attorney, noting that the question "invites candidates to show how diligent they have been in researching the firm and to demonstrate the depth of their enthusiasm." This question was the favorite of a number of the interviewers polled.
- Several hiring attorneys commented that they like to ask candidates about their perceived strengths and weaknesses. One interviewer reported that this is a favorite question "because I am looking for someone with profound self-awareness."
- Those who recruit for specific types of positions — federal prosecutor's or public defender's offices, for example — frequently ask why the interviewee is interested in that specific type of practice.
- Not one of the interviewers contacted by NALP likes to pose hypothetical legal questions. However, several recruiters for legal services and public

defender's offices reported that they sometimes ask how a candidate would react to a client with poor hygiene or handle an irrational person.

- Career objectives, interests, and activities are all favorite areas of question and conversation. Many interviewers said that they rely on résumés to suggest topics of questions.
- One interviewer reported that he often asks a variation of the classic desert island question — specifically, "If you were stranded on a desert island and could have only one of your current material possessions with you, which would it be and why?" But, questions reflect unique personalities, and another interviewer commented: "I would never ask one of those desert island questions."

Other questions listed as favorites by one or more of the attorneys contacted by NALP were —

- Why did you pick your particular law school?
- How has law school been better, worse, or different from what you expected?
- What do you want to be doing ten years from now?
- What are you looking for in a law firm (or other employing organization)?
- What achievements do you look back on with pride and why?
- If you could be anything other than a lawyer, what would it be and why?
- Could you describe a situation in which you were able to use persuasion successfully to convince someone to approach things your way?

The last question above is an example of a "behavioral interviewing" question. The more experienced the interviewer, the more likely he or she may be to ask questions about past performance (perhaps based on your résumé) to learn how you approach tasks. Be ready to provide specific examples of the ways experiences on your résumé have illustrated how you approach leadership, take initiative, exhibit resourcefulness, or relate to others.

Some interviewers — particularly several with very small firms — had no favorite questions but saw interviews instead as conversations in which they were trying to envision what it would be like to work closely with the candidate.

With such widely varying approaches to interviewing, how can you possibly prepare? "My advice to law students," said one hiring attorney, "is that they don't need to prepare a presentation, but they do need to be prepared to present themselves, to talk about their experiences and the things they have done, and to discuss what those activities say about their strengths."

The Most — and Least — Impressive Responses . . .

Hiring attorneys told NALP they are **most** impressed by responses that are genuine, honest, direct, thoughtful, and articulate. Employers reported that they are **least** impressed by answers that are canned, uninformed, insincere, over-rehearsed, or arrogant.

Additional comments from hiring attorneys on the qualities that are most — and least — impressive follow:

- “Being able to tell a good story is impressive; it can make a wonderful impression if the interviewee says ‘Let me tell you about this. . . .’” *(an interviewer for a large government agency)*
- “Responses that demonstrate a realistic view of law practice and of life in general are impressive. I am least impressed by candidates who seem driven only by the desire to earn money.” *(an attorney with a very small law firm)*
- “I’m impressed by responses that reflect genuine commitment and appreciation of poverty law.” *(an attorney with a small legal services office)*
- “Most impressive are answers that reveal how candidates became the people they are. Least impressive are such general canned responses as ‘I love the law’ or ‘I want to help people.’” *(a hiring attorney for a large law firm)*
- “I am most impressed by candidates who go out on a limb and offer some personal insight or experience. I am interested in seeing what level of passion they have and are willing to expose.” *(a hiring attorney for a very large law firm)*
- “I’m least impressed when a candidate doesn’t treat the interview as a formal proceeding — for example, I’ve even had candidates use profanity during an interview! Such behavior seems presumptuous and makes me question the person’s ability to function effectively as a trial lawyer.” *(an attorney with a federal defender’s office)*
- “If there’s anything really annoying, it’s candidates who come in and have nothing to say other than how great your firm is and how happy they are

to have gotten the interview. . . . They don’t have to try buttering me up about my own firm.” *(a hiring attorney with a large law firm)*

- “I’m most impressed by candidates who are able to answer a question and simultaneously steer the conversation toward a point they want to make about their interests or qualifications.” *(a hiring attorney for a very large law firm)*
- “Most impressive are interviewees who are able to enter into a dialogue with their interviewers.” *(a hiring attorney with a large law firm)*

“I am most impressed by candidates who go out on a limb and offer some personal insight or experience. I am interested in seeing what level of passion they have and are willing to expose.”

When It's Your Turn to Ask Questions . . .

"What I'm looking for is an interested person," an interviewer for a government agency told NALP, "and interested people ask questions. It's one of the things candidates are the very worst about," added the interviewer. "Candidates need to decide whether a job with our agency will help launch them on the career path they want to pursue for the rest of their lives, and I'm amazed at how often interviewees have no questions about working here."

"If a person isn't asking, 'What will I do in this job?'" noted another interviewer, "you wonder if they really care."

The sweaty palms and knotted stomachs associated with interviewing tend to be connected to fears about responding to interviewers' questions. But that's only one side of the equation. Most of the hiring attorneys NALP contacted said that they expect interviewees to ask questions. "Good, well-thought out questions," said an interviewer for a large law firm, "are one of the most important things that I'm looking for in a candidate."

Several other hiring attorneys underscored the importance of thoughtful questions. Said one, "If someone sounds as if they are just trying to think of something to ask, I'm not impressed." Another hiring attorney commented, "I'm impressed when people ask questions that relate to something they are genuinely interested in. That type of question," the hiring attorney added, "can demonstrate enthusiasm and help to establish a natural give-and-take during the interview."

Ironically, candidates who focus on rehearsing questions for the sole purpose of impressing interviewers are likely to sell both interviewers and themselves short. The interviewers NALP contacted repeatedly noted their dislike of "canned" questions and answers. More important, candidates who think only about what interviewers want to hear will miss a critical opportunity to gather the information essential to career planning and decision-making.

"What I think is important," one hiring attorney advises interviewees, "is to really think about how a firm fits with what you want to do for the rest of your life and then formulate questions accordingly."

What kinds of questions do hiring attorneys think candidates should be posing? NALP asked hiring attorneys to reflect on past interviews as well as on their own work experience. A sampling of questions interviewers think candidates should be asking follows. Of course, not all questions are relevant to all types of employers — or to all levels of hiring.

- **Tell me about the work and working conditions.** What will I do in this job? What might I be doing in my second week? What kind of responsibility would I have? How do entry-level associates progress through the office? How much direct client contact can I expect to have during my first and second year? Are associates assigned to one partner or are they part of a pool of associates available to work with a number of different partners? What kinds of opportunities are available for someone who wants to work on a special project? How long does it normally take for a new associate to be able to participate in a trial?
- **Tell me how the firm is organized.** How do attorneys get channeled into different practice groups — or into working relationships with particular partners or particular clients? How is work assigned? What is the structure/management style?
- **Tell me about your summer program.** How is your summer clerkship program structured? What types of projects do summer associates work on? How are summer associates evaluated? How is feedback provided during the summer? How do summer associates get their assignments? How many offers did you make to summer associates last year? How many of those students accepted?
- **Tell me about attorney training.** What kinds of opportunities for training and guidance are available to new associates? To what extent are partners involved in educating associates? To what extent do attorneys have a chance to direct their own professional development? How are entry-level associates supervised? How are associates evaluated? How will this firm help me become the best lawyer I can be so that I can contribute in the long-term to our clients?
- **Tell me about the firm's future plans.** Which of the firm's practice areas are expanding? What types of new areas does the firm want to move into? What are the firm's priorities? Tell me about the long-term stability and vision of the firm. Does the firm expect to grow in the next five years, and, if so, what type of growth is anticipated — i.e., more new associates, more lateral hires, new offices? How have you seen your own practice evolve?
- **Tell me about the firm's pro bono policy.** What types of outside activities (bar-related and otherwise) are your lawyers involved with?

What is expected in terms of participation in professional organizations?

- **Share your insights.** Why do you like being a part of this organization? Why did you choose this firm? What do you think sets this firm apart from other firms of its type? How do you find the quality of life within the firm? How would you describe the personality of the firm?

Avoiding Awful Questions

Forget the old adage that there is no such thing as a stupid question. Consider, for example, the case of a hiring attorney who was asked for information on Cincinnati; the question might have seemed innocuous except for the fact that the firm had no office in Cincinnati! Asking questions that reveal you have done no research on an organization is a sure way to communicate lack of interest not only in the employer but also in your own professional career.

In this electronic age, information sources abound. Large law firms expect law students to have read employers' NALP forms, firm résumés, and other information available in the law school career services office, on the firm's web site, and through such online resources as www.nalpdirectory.com (the online version of the *NALP Directory of Legal Employers*). An online search of news sources can yield valuable insights regarding current involvements of prominent law firms. Information about small employers may not be as plentiful, but, at a minimum, candidates should be familiar with the content of an organization's web site; online searches can yield added information about the organization and about interviewers. Candidates who are not familiar with an employer's city might consult the web sites of the local newspaper and Chamber of Commerce.

"If students ask questions that would be readily answered by referring to a firm's résumé or NALP form," said one interviewer, "it shows they either haven't read these materials or are too unimaginative or uninterested to think of other questions." The better informed you are when you walk into an interview, the more likely you are to engage in a meaningful dialogue that will impress your interviewer and provide you with the basis for a sound career decision.

One last *caveat* about questions. While all of the employers NALP surveyed cautioned against uninformed questions, some also noted their dislike of questions regarding compensation and number of hours worked, especially when those questions are raised during initial screening interviews. "If the first question out of an interviewee's mouth is, 'What will I make?' or 'What is the minimum num-

ber of hours I will be required to work?'" said one hiring attorney, "I question the candidate's genuine interest and commitment." Asking interviewers what they earn or asking what partners make was judged inappropriate at all stages of the interview process.

Handling Difficult Issues

Low grades: If your grades are lower than you would like, don't try to evade interviewers' questions about grades. The employers NALP surveyed were unanimous in saying it is best to be honest and up front. Take responsibility; don't blame grades on everyone but yourself, and don't become defensive or defeatist. However, do explain any extenuating circumstances — for example, family emergencies or the demands of working your way through school. If your grades were low during your first year of law school and then improved, point out your record of accomplishment. Deal with the issue of grades directly, but don't dwell on your grades. Move on to positive achievements.

Not receiving an offer from a summer employer: Again, honesty and forthrightness are essential according to the employers NALP contacted. "If I ask if they know why they didn't get an offer and they know, I expect a straight answer," said one hiring attorney. Several hiring attorneys commented that references from a candidate's summer employer can be helpful.

One hiring attorney offered the following advice: "Honestly assess any problems and what you have done to remedy those problems. When a candidate says, 'Oh, it was just political,' the interviewer wonders whether the candidate is being up front. We will talk to the candidate's summer employer, so we will find out about problems a candidate glossed over."

Another interviewer summed up the advice of many of the hiring attorneys NALP contacted by saying, "Explain factors involved in not receiving an offer quickly and with straightforward honesty. Then move on."

Other Special Issues

Lack of geographic ties to the employer's area: Few of the questions NALP posed to hiring attorneys drew such varied responses as asking about the importance of a candidate's geographic connections (or lack thereof) to the employer's area. "Most of the people we've hired have had no particular connection to our town," said one hiring attorney with a small firm. But geographic ties were very important to many of the other employers NALP contacted. One hiring attorney summed up the viewpoint of a number of interviewers by saying, "Employers have a limited number of offers to give, so they like to give them to people who are enthusiastically committed to their organizations. If you have no obvious geographic ties, try to work into the conversation why you are interested in practicing in the specific area where the employer is located."

"Do your homework," cautioned several hiring attorneys, noting that researching geographic locations is an essential part of that homework. Asking questions about an employer's city can demonstrate genuine interest, but only if the questions are based on a sound general knowledge of information that can easily be researched.

Lack of certainty about preferred practice area: "Law students are more inclined than they should be to pinpoint areas of specialty," a hiring attorney with a small firm told NALP. "I'm suspicious of students who come in knowing exactly what they want to do," stated another interviewer. Most hiring attorneys surveyed by NALP concurred, but with several *caveats*:

- While entry-level candidates may not be ready to narrow their focus to one specific practice area, they should be able to articulate interests.
- Some legal organizations are very specialized; these employers must seek candidates whose interests match their organizations' specific needs.
- Similarly, many legal employers provide new associates with exposure to a number of practice areas — usually through a rotational program. Other organizations hire to fill specific departmental needs and cannot easily transfer an associate to a different department. If you want opportunities to experience a variety of practice areas, be sure to select employers who provide such flexibility.

Of course, candidates who have already narrowed their focus to a specific practice area should search for firms practicing in that area. A number of the hiring attorneys contacted by NALP reported cases of interviewees declaring an

interest in a specific practice area not offered by the employer with whom they were interviewing.

Moreover, if you express interest in a specific practice area, interviewers are likely to ask about the reasons for your interest. "If a person says he or she wants to be a tax lawyer," noted one hiring attorney, "we'd like to see that they have been exposed to some type of tax concepts before they come here." He added: "Students today have to be much more focused on where they think they can contribute based on what they've already done in their lives up to this point. The days of just being able to bounce around while deciding were the days of the '70s, and they're gone."

Quality of Life and Diversity Issues

When NALP asked employers how candidates can learn more about quality of life issues and about such issues as acceptance of women, attorneys of color, and gblt attorneys, most large law firms pointed to their firm literature, their NALP form, and the NALP "Workplace Environment Questionnaire" that many firms submit to law school career services offices.

"We publish a diversity report every year," said one hiring attorney with a large law firm. "If candidates don't know about it, they haven't done their homework on us." He added that candidates can also consult the firm's NALP form, do an historical perspective on the firm, and talk to career services staff, faculty, alumni, and/or students who have clerked for the firm.

Information on smaller organizations may not be as readily available. The interviewers NALP surveyed were unanimous in encouraging candidates to ask questions. However, several hiring attorneys acknowledged that some questions are difficult to ask — or may yield inadequate responses. For example, will asking questions about billable hours or part-time options be perceived as an unwillingness to work hard? Will questions about a firm's openness to and encouragement of diversity meet with platitudes that have little to do with the day-to-day realities of the workplace?

During a callback or follow-up interview — or even after receiving an offer but before making your decision — consider asking for an opportunity to speak to other law firm associates. If, for example, you are concerned about organizational opportunities for African-American attorneys, express interest in speaking to an African-American associate. If you are assessing opportunities for mentoring and networking with diverse attorneys, you may also want to learn about the activities

of area bar associations — including not only state and local bar associations but also any minority bar associations active in the area.

Addressing Poor or Inappropriate Interview Questions

What if you've prepared, but your interviewer hasn't? As an association that provides educational opportunities to recruitment professionals, NALP would love to be able to guarantee that every hiring attorney you meet will be a highly skilled interviewer. Unfortunately, this may sometimes not be the case.

Take responsibility for the interview. Know your strengths and be ready to communicate them. An interview is much like a meeting an attorney might have with a potential client. As in such a business meeting, "taking charge" does not mean being domineering or precluding all small talk. Instead, your goal is to establish a natural give-and-take while steering the conversation toward the strengths you want to communicate.

What if you are asked a question you consider inappropriate — or, worse yet, illegal? The hiring attorneys contacted by NALP were unanimous in stressing that law students who are asked illegal questions should notify their career services directors immediately. "In this day and time," said one hiring partner, "attorneys should know what can be lawfully asked and what cannot. When they cross the line, it should not be tolerated."

In a case where a question seems inappropriate but not necessarily illegal, most of the hiring attorneys contacted by NALP counseled that the interviewee tactfully and politely point out that the question does not seem relevant (and/or that it seems inappropriate) and then segue into a discussion of accomplishments.

"Take responsibility for the interview. . . . An interview is much like a meeting an attorney might have with a potential client."

Offers and Decisions

The Employer's Decision-Making Process

The employers interviewed by NALP in the preparation of this publication reported a diverse range of specific hiring procedures. However, for the majority of organizations, hiring new attorneys involves some form of collective decision-making — often by a hiring or recruiting committee (in large firms), by the leadership of a department (in firms that hire by department), or by all attorneys (in very small firms). In some organizations, a committee presents recommendations for final decision by the managing partner or CEO.

"One person has final authority," noted a recruiter for a government agency. "From our 1,000 résumés, we conduct about 500 on-campus interviews; from these we select 40 candidates for all interviewers to consider, and from those 40 we recommend finalists and alternates for our eight positions."

"Candidates are generally interviewed by at least three partners or associates, at least one of whom is a member of the hiring committee," commented a hiring attorney for a large firm. "Each interviewer fills out a detailed candidate evaluation form, grading candidates in ten different areas ranging from intelligence to poise. Each member of the committee receives a full packet of materials on each applicant, including a résumé and all evaluations. The committee then discusses each candidate, with deference given to the committee member who actually interviewed the candidate."

How heavily is a candidate's performance in the interview process weighed in the decision-making process? On this point almost all of the hiring attorneys surveyed by NALP were in agreement: Interview performance is critical in determining whether a candidate receives an offer.

"I can't emphasize enough how important it is for a student to perform well during a callback," said one hiring attorney, noting that his firm would reject a student who ranked first in his or her law school class if interview evaluations led the hiring committee to believe the student would not be a good fit.

"There is just a human thing that happens during the interview," commented another hiring attorney, "and it is a meeting of the minds or no meeting of the minds. If there is a good feeling generated by the interview, then you're more likely to hire somebody." Yet another hiring attorney noted, "Grades only buy you an interview; it is the interview that gets you the job."

“We Regret to Inform You . . .”

When NALP asked hiring attorneys why they reject candidates, many cited the large number interviewed compared to the few who can be hired. “We reject people because they don’t have something outstanding that we can seize upon to say this is why we need this person,” said one hiring attorney, adding, “We’ve got to be able to sell candidates when we get back to our offices.”

The following are the primary reasons hiring attorneys cited for eliminating candidates from consideration.

- **Lack of enthusiasm.** With so many competing for each job, candidates must be able to convey not only interest but also enthusiasm. Demonstrating a lack of knowledge of a firm’s practice is one sure way to communicate a lack of desire to work for that firm. Other indications of disinterest include a general lack of energy and body language that betrays boredom (i.e., yawning, looking around the room).
- **Arrogance.** “We can’t afford to be working with someone who is not willing to listen to someone else’s perspective,” said one hiring attorney, adding, “Ultimately we are a business, and we can’t afford someone who is going to be negligent because he values his opinions so much more highly than anybody else’s.”
- **Poor communication skills.** Interviewers recognize that interviewees are nervous, but inability to communicate with an interviewer raises red flags about a candidate’s ability to relate to colleagues and clients.

In the end, however, the hiring attorneys NALP contacted emphasized that hiring is less a matter of rejection than of deciding which candidates stand out from those interviewed. One hiring attorney shared an anecdote regarding a law student who demonstrated a lot of energy and enthusiasm. “I was the last interviewer of the day when she came for an in-office interview,” said the hiring attorney, “and we ended up yakking for about an hour when we were supposed to be meeting for only a half-hour. I led her to the elevator afterward but, just as the elevator came and she popped into it, someone called me from the end of the hallway. I was too distracted to stop the elevator, and I went back to my office sulking a bit because I was afraid that the lack of a formal handshake and farewell might have created a terrible impression of me and of the firm. About ten

minutes later, there was a knock on my door, and she came walking back into my office, saying, ‘We didn’t formally say goodbye, and I want to thank you for the information you have given me. I have enjoyed talking with you, and I also want to formally say goodbye.’ She took control of the situation, and do I love that! I was sold on her.”

At the time NALP interviewed this particular hiring attorney, the woman he described was doing very well as one of the firm’s summer associates. He offered an additional suggestion: “An interviewee doesn’t have to depend on the interviewer to make a personal connection, especially during the in-office interview, where office decor may provide an indication of the interviewer’s interests. Looking up your interviewer(s) in Martindale-Hubbell is another way to discover educational or other connections. Most people,” said the hiring attorney, “don’t look for a personal connection beyond the essential purpose of the interview. Those who establish a connection stand out in the interviewer’s memory.”

Suppose that, despite your best efforts to follow the advice in this booklet, you still receive one of those “We regret to inform you” letters. If you have established sufficient rapport with an interviewer or with the recruitment coordinator, turn the experience into a learning process by asking about the reasons you did not receive an offer.

“We reject people because they don’t have something outstanding that we can seize upon to say this is why we need this person. We’ve got to be able to sell candidates when we get back to our offices. . . .”

Your Criteria for Selecting an Employer

A successful interview is one that enables you to make a more informed career decision while providing an employer with an understanding of your potential contributions to an organization.

Based on their own employment experiences, what criteria do hiring attorneys suggest you use in selecting an employer? The following is a sampling of the responses NALP received when that question was posed to hiring attorneys from a variety of employment settings:

- “Look beyond immediate financial concerns and analyze interests, priorities, and values. After a couple of years, a good salary will not, by itself, justify staying with a firm that does not accommodate your needs.”
- “Look for people you can get along with and would like to work with.”
- “Deciding what factors to evaluate is a very personal decision. You have to feel comfortable in your surroundings. As you walk the halls, observe the way lawyers interact with one another and with support staff.”
- “Look for an employer that will, over the next three or four years, provide a great education (both on the job and by sending you to seminars) and a high level of responsibility with interesting work and heavy client contact.”
- “The quality of life, the personality of the firm, and the law firm culture are very important.”
- “First, understand your interests and personal motivation. Then consider preferences regarding size of firm, type of practice, and management structure and style.”

A Few Final Words from Employers

- **Finding the job you want requires knowing what you want.** Take advantage of the career planning resources offered by your law school. Use your own personal network — including your law school career services office, professors, classmates, alumni from your school, family, and friends — to locate attorneys working in areas of interest. Engage in information interviewing to gain a better understanding of the nature of day-to-day work in specific employment settings.

- **Hone your résumé and interview skills.** Take advantage of interview training resources offered by your career services office. Ask a career counselor, faculty member, and/or practicing attorney to critique your résumé. Participate in mock interviews. If your law school does not offer a formal mock interview program, consider asking a career counselor or faculty member to conduct a mock interview with you and provide suggestions for improving your interview skills. Information interviewing is another excellent way to hone communication skills.

- **Follow up an in-office interview with a thank you letter.** While a thank you note will not redeem a poor interview, a well-written letter can reinforce a good interview. All of the *caveats* about cover letters apply also to thank you letters; unprofessional appearance, poor grammar, typos, or a “mass mailing” tone will negate even the best of interviews.

- **Observe proper interview etiquette.** If you decide not to accept an invitation to interview, decline the invitation as soon as possible. Being a “no show” is a sure way to “burn your bridges” with an employer — and it is extremely unfair to others who might have had the opportunity to interview in your place. If you are traveling out of town for an interview, be sure you understand the employer’s travel expense reimbursement policy *before* the interview.

In Closing . . .

The employers who participated in the creation of this publication hope that the perspectives they have shared will help make the interview process less intimidating and more rewarding for you. After all, an interview is your chance to evaluate an employer just as much as it is the employer’s opportunity to become acquainted with you. An interview that is a meaningful dialogue can become the first step toward a richly fulfilling career.

Resources

Founded in 1971 as the National Association for Law Placement, NALP is a nonprofit educational association. NALP's membership includes virtually every ABA-accredited law school and more than 1,100 legal employers. To support informed decision-making in the legal career planning process, NALP offers a variety of resources. Visit NALP's online Bookstore at www.nalp.org to learn about the latest resources on law career planning and job search strategies. The following resources may be of particular interest.

- The *NALP Directory of Legal Employers* features information on practice areas, hiring needs, demographics, and more for each employer listed. The print version is published annually; the *Directory* can also be found online at www.nalpdirectory.com.
- *Choosing Small, Choosing Smart: Job Strategies for Lawyers in the Small Firm Market*, by Donna Gerson, NALP. This comprehensive guide to understanding the small firm market includes advice on approaching firms effectively and on negotiating salary and benefits.

Contributors to the first edition of this publication included the NALP 1992-1995 Counseling Concerns Committees, the 1995-96 NALP Publications Committee, and 35 legal employers representing a diverse array of employment settings in all regions of the United States. *An Insider's Guide to Interviewing* was written and revised by NALP's Director of Publications, Janet Smith.



1025 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 1110, Washington, DC 20036-5413
Phone: (202) 835-1001 ■ Fax: (202) 835-1112 ■ www.nalp.org

© 1996 National Association for Law Placement. All rights reserved.
Revised 3rd edition © 2004 NALP.