

How to be the model candidate.....

.....and ensure that your recruiter wants to work for you.

By Kristi Edwards

Just about every candidate has a horror story of a pushy, underprepared, incompetent and sometimes blatantly unethical recruiter. However, get a billing of legal recruitment consultants (an appropriate collective noun, we thought) in a room and just as every job seeker has a tale of bad behaviour, so does every recruiter have an account of the candidate who, on initial encounter is brilliant, flawless, perfectly qualified and eminently 'placeable' but who turns bad by engaging in unhelpful, counterproductive, time-wasting and sometimes destructive behaviour.

The process of finding a job, to put it in a context you may better understand, is a lot like deal making, when it works best it involves a team (replacing client and lawyer with candidate and recruiter) involved in information sharing, careful negotiations, attention to timing, deliberate conversations and patience. In these circumstances, if a client is engaged in conduct that is not pushing toward a goal, a lawyer is simply not able to push it into the net alone. Same goes for the candidate and the recruiter.

So, how does a candidate keep their legal recruiter starry-eyed, motivated and keen - what is a model candidate? We offer this advice not to make our job easier (although that would be a helpful by-product) or to suggest that all recruiters are bathed in a wash of angelic light, always acting with utter professionalism, but to advise what you need to do (or not do) in order to best utilise your recruiter and secure yourself the role you are aiming for.

Think before you act

Candidates who start with an idea of where they would like to end undoubtedly gain far more from the process than those who simply head along to speak to a consultant on a whim after a particularly bad day or a bad review. By all means, *do* come and see us if those situations arise; if you do not feel that there is anything that can be done to improve your situation and you really *do* want to move on. Remember though, what a difference a day makes and how sometimes a sleep and some perspective can make things seem a whole lot better.

Having said that, if it is some general market intelligence you are after, a good legal recruiter will be happy to discuss with you the market in some detail, along with your place in it, your prospects and your salary and bonus (and trends and indications on movement) without too much pressure to commence acting for you then and there. Indeed this is how we build lasting relationships with candidates. All we ask is that you place some thought into what you would like to gain from the meeting, you will find it far more rewarding and there's nothing quite as motivating for a recruiter than a well prepared candidate.

Don't instruct every recruiter you speak to

Many lawyer candidates work with the first agent that they speak to. Then they contact another and another and instruct those as well because they think that way they're really 'covering the market'. They think that they are giving themselves the best possible chance of finding a new role that will fulfil their goals. They're not.

You need to take to process more seriously than that. Your relationship with your recruiter should be one of trust, with the two of you working together in a targeted and more academic fashion than instructing as many agents as possible to cover off as many firms or organisations as possible. The market is too sophisticated and, these days too tight and competitive for this 'scatter-gun' approach to be effective. Once you have made the decision to search for a new job – at least take the time to instruct the right recruiter – one who will work with you and advise you properly as to opportunities and the market.

Recruiters are results focussed. You will find it hard to motivate someone to assist you who only has a 1 in 50 chance of placing you, which are the odds you present us with when you instruct multiple agents. We are not for a moment suggesting that you should only ever instruct one agency, in fact on occasion we feel it's a better idea to instruct two. It may be that one has a particularly close relationship with a firm/partner recruiting that could be beneficial to you. All we are saying is keep it tight.

We'd also recommend that you meet a legal recruiter before you instruct them. In addition to it being invaluable to us in getting the measure of you as a candidate and being able to discuss you more meaningfully with clients, it helps build rapport and it gives you an opportunity to size us up.

Don't allow your details to be sent off to a long list of firms

This follows on from the last point. The most effective job search is a targeted one. You will not 'cover' the market by allowing your CV to be sent to a long list of law firms on a *purely* speculative approach on the off chance that something in your CV *may* tweak someone's interest. There is no science and no skill to this approach. You are more likely to hinder your chances than enhance them and more often than not this approach results in your CV simply being deleted by the busy person who received 5 other unsolicited, sometimes unsuitable CVs that morning.

That said, if you have a relationship based on trust and a good rapport with your recruiter, he/she will advise you that sometimes even where there is no specific role 'advertised', a discreet enquiry and a speculative approach is sometimes the best way to secure an interview. A good relationship with a particular partner or the law firm or organisation as a whole and a genuine knowledge of the firm/organisation's growth strategy and needs are critical tools in any good recruiter's kit. We observe that over 60% of lawyer candidates placed are through what are initially exploratory enquiries, resulting in interviews.

So, whilst allowing a legal recruiter to approach scores of firms is never an approach that will net results, targeted approaches to a number of firms based on knowledge and strength of relationship will.

Listen to advice

Above we discussed which firms to approach and what shape this may take – be it approaching all at once or in a staggered manner – it is an obvious point that a good legal recruiter should know his/her playing field and should be able to advise you on firms who are active, reputable and suitable in your area of practice. In addition to the provision of this more ‘technical’ advice, an effective recruiter will likely have assisted many candidates through the recruitment and interview process. If the relationship with your recruiter develops as it should and you trust him/her (you should do as you have selected them to represent you), do not discount the guidance they offer. They have invaluable insight into a particular firm/organisation’s culture and quirks. Sometimes, you don’t ‘know better’. They do.

When we say to a lawyer, in preparing them for an interview, ‘save that question for later’ and we find out that they’ve asked it anyway, against advice, it generally works against them. For example, when we advise you not to discuss partnership opportunities at the first interview, it is because we *know* the firm and we know that such questions are generally better left to a later stage of the process. In other words, every law firm is different, it’s our job to understand such nuances and communicate them to you. Trust your recruiter and the relationship you have to guide you as to how to approach each stage of the process; the initial approach, the interview and beyond. Allow them to help you devise a strategy that will work.

The same goes for advice on re-drafting your CV; we look at literally scores of these each week – we know what works. While you may feel it of relevance to add minutiae of detail about a deal you worked on 6 years ago, we know that sometimes your efforts are better directed elsewhere.

Be realistic

Your legal recruiter’s knowledge of the marketplace should help you to develop realistic expectations of what you will be able to secure and achieve. A hike in salary, being hired immediately as a partner, changing from litigation to corporate law or making your way toward a City law firm from a smaller practice – these are common entries on candidates’ wish lists – do listen to advice as to how or if they can be achieved and with that guidance in mind, set your goals. It may be that you need to take a more round-a-bout route than you had originally envisaged but try to remember that a recruiter *wants* to place you. That’s how we get paid. Keep an open mind and be realistic.

We often have candidates approach us with completely out of reach expectations. This, in itself is not the issue. It does though, become a problem when, despite advice based on experience (we *know* the law firms that will hire laterally at partner level and those that won’t and we *know* the firms that strictly adhere to their salary bands and those where there is room for manoeuvre) a

candidate steadfastly clings to a goal that is not achievable. You will find it very hard to motivate a recruiter to work hard for you if your expectations mean that he/she cannot possibly place you!

Prepare, prepare, prepare

This is a completely obvious and self explanatory point but one that needs to be made as we are constantly surprised that (sometimes even senior) lawyers approach their job search unprepared and worse still, approach the interview process underprepared. You should prepare at every stage of the process; before you engage a recruiter, before and during the interview process and during negotiations.

Communicate

Our final point. Arguably the most important. It's cheesy but true – communication is the most important element of any relationship. Your relationship with a recruiter is no exception. The relationship should be based on trust and open, full communication. Your recruiter should know your goals for the future, your past professional mistakes, what you would ideally like your next role to look like, what you feel your strengths are. Just as importantly, practical information such as which firms if any you have already applied to (no, it won't help if we apply *again* for you), what your current salary is (keeping this a secret will not assist and will make salary negotiations on your behalf impossible), what your bonus structure looks like, what your supervising partner said at your last review are all pieces of information we need in order to represent you honestly and well. Equally, any 'skeletons' are things that we should know about. In most cases, issues can be mitigated if we have full information. Generally, things only go nuclear if we find out about problems at a later stage when in most instances, a frank, well-placed discussion in the initial stages can cut any questions off at the pass. You smell like a rose for being so open (oh and it makes us look good too).

Lastly, do keep in mind that a good legal recruiter wants to assist you. Sometimes this does not mean placing you. If you live up to your side of the bargain and give us the tools with which we need to work, we'll either find you a job or we'll give you considered, informed advice that will greatly support you and hopefully, when it is time to move, you'll remember us as that terribly helpful, un-pushy, well-prepared, competent, informed recruiter and give us a call.