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Four tips to find the law firm that's right for you

Standing out in today's legal market is challenging. These four tips from recruiters at Canada's leading law firms reveal that you need to be yourself and be prepared at every step in the interview process.

#1 Think it through: know your narrative

A successful interview begins before the application process and involves thinking critically about past experiences (work, educational, extra-curricular, or community involvement). In which environments did you thrive? In which did you struggle? What did you learn? What issues drew your attention? Be honest. Your answers will form the basis of your "narrative", an edited version of which will be woven through your application, answers, and questions for interviewers. Knowing your narrative will allow you to confidently action other tips, like "be yourself" and "avoid canned answers", and also give you the tools to make informed career decisions.

Kimberly Grange
Director of Talent, Recruitment & Student Development
Dentons Canada LLP

#2 It ain't over 'til it's over

One of my top tips for candidates approaching any organized recruit is to remember that it isn't over until you get that final call with a job offer at the end of the process. With this in mind, go into each interview/follow-up visit and treat it as your one and only interview – things can shift throughout the process with recruiters often making their final decisions up to the last minute. It is essential to try to make a strong lasting (positive) impression in each and every meeting in order to maximize your job offers.

David Tsai
Partner
Miller Thomson

#3 Put authenticity first

The most frequent question I get asked is "what qualities does your firm look for in a candidate?". I don't like this question because the truth is most employers are looking for the same fundamental qualities. If you want to stand out, it's not about checking the employer's boxes, but instead speaking authentically about what you bring to the table!

Kim Bonnar
Assistant Director of Professional Resources – Student Programs
Cassels Brock

#4 The importance of questions

Questions are key to showing interest and to developing greater rapport with the firm and the lawyers you are interviewing with. Generic questions, like questions about a firm's rotation and mentoring program, are fine for initial discussion but in subsequent discussions candidates should refine and develop questions that give firms and lawyers insight into what the candidates see as important to making their decisions. Personalizing these questions so the lawyer can sell their individual experiences and reasons for choosing the firm is also key. For example, instead of "tell me about your mentoring program," ask "how do you mentor students and why is that approach to mentoring important to you?"

Chris McKenna
Manager, Student Recruitment and Programs (Ontario)
Bennett Jones LLP

Interview questions to test your knowledge of legal services management

You're prepared to answer the tough questions on law, but are you ready to answer questions about how the practice of law is managed? These questions will help you think beyond the law, and about the business side of law where you can stand out with employers.

Q: What do you think the practice of law will look like in 10 years?

Why your answer is important:

The industry and practice of law is changing rapidly, and firms know this better than anyone. Being able to speak to and show an understanding of factors like alternative practice models and artificial intelligence as a research tool will show you're not just a short-term pick but a long-term candidate for a firm.

Q: How will you ensure you have a successful career as a lawyer?

Why your answer is important:

Showing you understand your needs and goals demonstrates an understanding that you're part of a model that has needs – whether it's a leading Bay Street firm or even an NGO or government department. Your definition of success should include an understanding of client business models, and show that you can provide advice that meets their business goals and strategy.

Q: What defines a good leader in the legal profession?

Why your answer is important:

More than ever, firms want to invest in leaders – not followers. Knowing how to manage a team, be part of a high-performing group, and understanding how to mentor subordinates shows that you're not just another cog in an associate pool, but somebody that can contribute to success at all levels.

Q: What are the benefits of project management in legal practice?

Why your answer is important:

Top firms, NGOs and government agencies understand that time is money, and project management optimizes time. If you know project management, you're showing you can manage costs, predict fees, complete tasks on time, meet deadlines and manage risk with every client engagement.

Q: How are vendor and purchaser strategies like asset or share purchasing relevant when advising a client on issues like acquisitions?

Why your answer is important:

Understanding business essentials like vendor/purchaser strategies are key to being able to properly work with and advise clients, helping them avoid issues like depreciation losses, liability exposure and tax. Vendors and purchasers have different goals and a lawyer needs to understand these goals in order to properly structure a deal; these kinds of business fundamentals are also applicable to the business of running a firm.

Q: Why is it important to understand the business of law?

Why your answer is important:

We're saving the best for last – this is the ultimate question! Understanding the business of law means you can better serve clients, and step up from being somebody who just provides technical facts about the law to become a trusted advisor for clients. Understanding the business of law ensures that you can keep up with the changes in the profession in order to remain relevant and in control of your career.

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