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Career Planning & Placement Office

Interviews: Finish Strong

By Valerie Fontaine and Roberta Kass | Law.Com

Making a good last impression in a job interview is almost as important as making a good first impression. Obviously, if an interview starts out badly, it is very difficult to turn things around. But, assuming you have done a decent job throughout, you also want to leave with a strong finish to set you apart from the other candidates vying for the job.

- **Timing.** If the interviewer starts summing up, closes your file or stacks up your résumé and related papers, glances at his or her watch, or stands up, that's your cue to start your close. Follow your interviewer's lead, and do not necessarily stick to the schedule.

If the discussion is going long but well, do not cut it short. (Be sure to leave enough time in your schedule to allow for flexibility.) On the other hand, when you get the signals that your interview is drawing to a close, make a succinct closing statement, and do not linger.

- **Summarize.** Briefly state what you believe to be the qualifications the employer is seeking, and then describe how your skills and background fit the bill. Pick two or three major points that were discussed during the interview. If you are interviewing with several attorneys one after another, you will need to convince each of them that you are the right candidate for the job. Assume that each interviewer knows nothing about you, and be prepared to repeat yourself -- just be consistent. Emphasize the contributions you could make to their firm.
- **Offer further information.** If you are a litigation associate, bring along a writing sample. If you are a transactional associate, you can offer to follow up with a deal sheet detailing your specific experience relevant to the position you are seeking, as discussed in the interview.

If you are a partner-level candidate, you might need to provide information regarding your book of business: clients, billing rates, hours billed, realization rate, billing history, etc. Senior attorneys also might be asked to put together a business plan detailing cross-selling opportunities with the firm at which you are interviewing and proposed activities to continue developing clients at the new firm.

Associate-level candidates might be asked to provide law school transcripts, and candidates of any level of seniority should be prepared to provide references. If you don't have the material with you, set a definite time to deliver the requested information to the prospective employer, and follow through.

- **Next step.** If the interviewer does not volunteer this information, ask where they are in their hiring process, what the next step will be and their timeline for making the hire. Let them know if you have any time constraints, as well, such as competing offers, a case going to trial or your firm closing down.

In most cases, the firm will be interviewing a number of candidates and may need to get others in for initial or callback meetings before deciding how to proceed with any particular one. If so, ask the interviewer when you should follow up and with whom. If, however, the firm wants to set up further interviews there and then, have your calendar handy so that arrangements can be made while their enthusiasm is high.

- **Show enthusiasm.** In interviewing, like courtship, both parties want to know how the other feels about them. Suitors prefer to know that their overtures will be positively received before extending themselves. Therefore, let the interviewer know that you enjoyed meeting him or her and having the opportunity to learn about the firm and that you look forward to continuing the discussions.

- Ask for the job. Don't assume that the interviewer knows that you want the job. Interviews are a two-way street, and you need to let the prospective employer know that you liked what you heard about the position and organization. State very clearly that you were impressed by the opportunity and would like to be part of their team. If appropriate, you might add that you would look forward to working with the interviewer, personally.

Just because you have stated your desire to be offered the job does not mean that you are obligated to accept it. That is a different question, depending upon what specifically is offered to you by that prospective employer and others with which you may be interviewing.

- Or, politely withdraw. If you discover during the interview that this clearly is not an offer you would want to accept, communicate that in a pleasant and positive manner, so as not to waste their time or yours. Keep in mind that the legal community is very small. You never know where, when, and under what circumstances you may cross paths with the interviewer or the firm.

At the very least, you have increased your knowledge of the legal marketplace and how law is practiced in that organization. If you are unsure about the suitability of the situation for you, however, keep your options open and do not jump the gun on closing out an opportunity.

- On-the-spot offers. This is the rare equivalent of love at first sight. Even if you are as enthusiastic as the prospective employer, do not accept on the spot! Give yourself at least overnight to think about it and come back with questions about details once the initial excitement has settled down a bit. Tell the interviewer how flattered and excited you are about the possibility of working on their team, if it is true, and that you will get back to them soon.

Sometimes, however, candidates think they are walking out the door with an offer, when that is not the case at all. Just because an interviewer discusses compensation (usually a first interview no-no) and asks when you might be available to start, that does not mean they have made you an offer. You need to hear the magic words to the effect of "We are offering you a job." Otherwise, the interviewer is merely collecting information about your suitability for the position. And -- as a lawyer you should know this -- you want to see it in writing before you consider the deal done.

- The goodbye. Just as you did at the start of the interview, look your interviewer in the eye, smile and shake hands firmly. Thank him or her for taking the time to meet with you, and make your exit knowing that you made a strong closing argument.

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