

New Year's Tips for Recent Graduates: Set SMART Job Search Goals

by Ramona J. Sein

At this time of year, unemployed recent graduates are having to come to grips with the fact that their post-graduate permanent job search is a marathon, not a sprint. After 7+ months of looking for employment, many newly minted JDs risk becoming frustrated to the point of paralysis. Even when recent graduates have focused their job search and defined a goal as concrete as “working as a litigation associate in a small firm in New York City,” the process and path to achieving that goal can seem overwhelming and prevent graduates from doing anything after months of searching unsuccessfully. Understandably, they’re ready to quit the race and throw in the towel. How do we as career advisors help motivate recent graduates to remain competitive and reach their goal of finding permanent employment?

The New Year is a perfect time to share a project management tip and encourage them to **set SMART goals**, which are characterized as being **Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant**, and having **Time-frames**. Here are suggestions to share with graduates on how to make their goals SMART goals:

- **Specific** — Identify clear actions and tasks that are mini-goals that build toward the ultimate goal of securing permanent employment.
- **Measurable** — Quantify the actions and tasks so that you can easily determine when they are complete.
- **Attainable** — Set yourself up for success by designing actions and tasks that are realistic and attainable.
- **Relevant** — Undertake actions and tasks that help you gain advice, information, and referrals (AIR) and, ultimately, employment with one of your “target employers.” Target employers are those organizations that fit your preferences for employer types, practice areas, and geographic locations.
- **Time-frames** — Set time-frames in which to attain your mini-goals.

We can help recent graduates develop SMART goals to find both legal practice and non-practicing positions. Some SMART job search goal examples for the recent graduate who wants to be a litigation associate at a small firm in NYC would be the following:

- I will schedule an appointment next week with a career advisor from my law school to discuss my career goals and develop SMART goals to obtain my first position.
- I will spend 20 - 30 hours per week on my job search by devoting four to five hours per day, five to six days a week.
- I will volunteer for 10 hours per week in a legal setting (or other setting relevant to my career goals) to gain experience and develop relationships with attorneys and professionals who can potentially serve as recommenders for me and refer me to other employers with employment opportunities.
- Each week, I will spend three days working on activities to find or create opportunities in the *hidden* job market and two days working on activities to obtain a job in the *visible* job market. To find or create opportunities in the

hidden job market, I will set up two networking coffee breaks with litigators at small firms to gain their insights and advice about the legal market, potential job leads at their firm or other employers, and referrals to other employers for networking or job application purposes. To obtain employment in the *visible* job market, I will set up weekly automatic job search alerts in Symplicity (and other online job posting forums) for job openings that meet my target employment criteria (New York City litigation positions for which a JD and a JD with bar license are required). Before applying, I will research each new opportunity and try to speak with someone who has worked for the employer to learn more about the position. I will incorporate the knowledge that I gain into my application materials.

- I will subscribe to daily email news alerts from the *New York Business Journal* to keep abreast of business and community developments. Note: there are *Business Journals* for several major cities across the country (www.bizjournals.com), and many news and industry media outlets offer free digital daily emails summarizing the top news stories in their markets.

- I will join relevant bar and professional associations such as the New York City Bar and the New York State Bar Association (including its Trial Lawyers Section). Each month, I will attend two bar events and offer to help edit the Trial Lawyers Section Digest to gain experience working with their members.

By developing SMART goals for the marathon job search, recent graduates can focus on manageable job search activities, land their first position, and develop effective work habits that will serve them well in their careers.

Ramona J. Sein is Assistant Dean, Employer Relations, at William & Mary Law School. This article was submitted on behalf of the NALP Law School Alumni Career Services Section.