Ten Ways Law Students Can Be More Persuasive in Interviews

by Lisa Abrams

What can career advisors do to encourage law students in the face of today’s distressed legal job market? Our students are as familiar with recent employment statistics as we are: NALP has reported an 85.6% employment rate for the Class of 2011, the lowest employment rate since 1994. Current students can expect only minimal improvement in the market.

By better understanding employer expectations and learning to implement persuasive strategies in their interviews, students can be prepared for employers’ cautious and conservative hiring policies. This cautious approach across all legal sectors means every interview becomes a precious opportunity.

Employers expect an unprecedented level of preparation for every interview. Ann Rainhart, Chief Talent Officer at Faegre Baker Daniels LLP, explains: “Hiring well has become the top priority post-recession. Law firms continue to need excellent talent, but are more focused than ever on finding and hiring people who are truly engaged in what we do. We are training our interviewees to ask tough questions, dig deeper into a candidate’s experience and look for ways that experience will translate into the practice and how they will behave and contribute at our firm.” Preparation is equally important for students seeking positions in the public sector.

As career advisors we can show students how implementing persuasive interview strategies can help throughout every stage of the interview process. It’s easier, however, to convince students that they need to be persuasive than to teach them exactly how to be persuasive. At the University of Chicago we do workshops at which we discuss interviewing and interview preparation, but we have found that our Generation Y students value and want advice personally tailored to their needs. As a result, at U of C we have made one-on-one interview coaching sessions available to our students. The sessions have proved popular and students have been enthusiastic about the immediate and practical applicability of what they’ve learned. We watch students approach interviews with a new sense of confidence and increased optimism.

Through our experience teaching persuasive interview techniques in one-on-one coaching sessions as well as in group workshops, we’ve found that sharing these ten strategies will benefit almost every student:

1. Thoroughly and thoughtfully research the organization. It’s not enough to simply review an employer’s website the night before an interview. Review news articles about the employer. Nexus and Bloomberg can be helpful, as can The Wall Street Journal and legal news sites. Take your research one step further by talking to students and alumni who have worked for the organization. For example, if you’re interviewing for a summer associate position, talk to 3Ls about what they enjoyed about their summer at the firm. If you are interviewing for a judicial externship, talk to students or young alumni who have worked for the judge with whom you are interviewing. During your interview, you’ll be able to mention the fact that you’ve taken time to

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talk with these persons, sharing the positive reports you've heard and talking about how this makes you even more interested in the organization. This networking based research will demonstrate your resourcefulness, your interpersonal communication skills, and your credible interest in the organization.

2. You MUST be able to answer the question “Why did you go to law school?” In coached interview sessions, we often find that this is the hardest of all questions for students to answer, perhaps because they feel prepared to answer it because they went through the law school application process and wrote essays about the topic. Don’t fall into this trap. Know exactly how you’re going to answer this question, and make sure that you develop a thesis sentence that answers the question (“I came to law school because…”) rather than a long, roundabout story of how you came to your decision. Then go one step further, implementing a persuasive strategy by talking about how your reasons for coming to law school link up with your interest in this organization, or talking about why you are glad you did come to law school — and give examples of what you’re enjoying about the law school experience.

3. To show you’re a valuable candidate, be able to identify your strongest skills (at least three) and give up to three examples of each from your educational experience or work history. Interviewers generally don’t ask you to name your top three skills and to give three examples of each, but by knowing this information cold and having it available in a mental outline, you’ll be able to build specific examples of value to interviewers. For example, “Writing is one of my strongest skills. As a history major, I loved the extensive research and writing involved in developing my senior thesis, and I’ve enjoyed the challenge of my legal research and writing class. Now I’m looking forward to gaining more practical legal research and writing experience by working with your lawyers.”

4. Be able to tell the firm, government agency, or public interest organization what you think is special about them. One of the most common complaints of interviewers is that they find most candidates are unable to articulate why they are interested in their particular organization. Law is a service profession, and legal employers want to hire people who are truly engaged in what they do. What about the employer do you value? Its mission? The type of work done at their office?

5. Show your ability to advocate by communicating why you want this job. Employer feedback indicates that students lose out on opportunities because they seem ambivalent or unsure or just not “hungry.” When we relay this to students, they tell us, “But I wouldn’t go on the interview if I didn’t want the job.” Yet in this market, just applying for a job or showing up for an interview isn’t enough to persuade an employer to give you serious consideration. Students must be able to explain why they want to be an extern or a summer associate with a particular employer. And students who are 3Ls must prove that they are a wise investment by showing that they are eager to pursue this opportunity and look forward to contributing from day one.

6. Demonstrate the high quality of your work product by giving examples of on-the-job accomplishments and relating anecdotes about work habits or characteristics employers have praised. Draw examples from both paid and volunteer experiences, offering specific examples of situations in which you’ve demonstrated work traits such as efficiency, follow through, initiative, and ownership.
7. Carefully plan the questions that you want to ask during the interview. One thing you can count on is that an interviewer will ask you (often at the end of an interview but sometimes at the beginning), "What questions do you have for me?" Have at least three questions in mind in advance of the interview. Carefully planned questions communicate your intellectual curiosity and show your sincere interest in the organization and the work you would do for them. The questions should be engaging for the interviewer to answer and should not be questions that can readily be answered by the employer's website or through cursory research.

8. Anticipate the questions you are most likely to be asked and plan in advance how you plan to answer them. It's a given that you'll be asked questions such as "tell me about yourself?" or, if you're interviewing in a city that doesn't appear on your résumé, "What makes you interested in working in this city?" If there is an area of questioning you're dreading (a gap in your résumé, grades weaker than you would like), know what your persuasive strategy is going to be to address questions about this area. The confidence you gain from knowing exactly how you're going to answer the toughest questions will increase your confidence throughout the entire interview, even if the dreaded question is never asked. And, if it is asked, your thoughtful answer will show your advocacy skills.

9. Practice your answers out loud. The goal is not to memorize your answers but rather to readily access a mind map of your persuasive points when you're under stress. Practicing out loud makes you much more likely to remember your examples, stories, and anecdotes. Repeatedly hearing yourself relate the persuasive points will lodge them in your long-term memory, and you'll be able to insert bits and pieces of the points at appropriate times throughout the interview. Hearing in your own voice your carefully planned answers will make you feel more sincere and comfortable — and thus make you even more persuasive.

10. Seek the advice of your career services office. You can never get enough feedback; interview skills can always be developed further. Try out your persuasive strategies in a session with a career services professional. Take advantage of the interview coaching or mock interview programs offered by your career services office, student and alumni groups, and local bar associations.

Lisa Abrams is Director of Career Services at the University of Chicago Law School and is the author of The Official Guide to Legal Specialties.