

Beyond the Listings: Why Use a Search Firm

By [Stephen E. Seckler](#)

A lawyer in California has top law firm experience, strong academic credentials and she is planning to relocate to the East Coast. Her husband is starting a medical residency at a large teaching hospital in Boston, and this associate plans to relocate when her husband's residency begins. She knows little about the legal market in Boston; and because she works in a busy corporate transactional practice, she has limited time to research which firms might be worth approaching. Should this individual work with a search firm to explore a lateral move?

- **Search Firms Can Provide a Valuable Service to Candidates Seeking to Relocate**

Most associates reading this fact pattern would say yes. Clearly, a good recruiter can help this associate understand the legal marketplace in Boston. A lawyer in California who has limited time to devote to a job search can benefit tremendously from the knowledge of a good recruiter. An effective search firm can also be a valuable agent on the ground that can identify opportunities that the lawyer might not discover.

But what if the lawyer is already working at a top firm in Boston? She likes the challenge and pace of corporate deal making, but she would like to work with different industries. She is not sure if the firm offers a good cultural fit for her in the long run, and overall, she has a general feeling that she is not in the right place.

Should this candidate contact a search firm? Should she send her resume to the first recruiter who calls with a tempting opportunity? Doesn't it make more sense for this individual to approach firms directly so that the law firm can avoid paying the search firm a commission? What value, if any, does an associate get from working with a search firm if she already knows the market?

- **Why Law Firms Use Recruiters (a.k.a. Search Consultants or Headhunters)**

Most law firms will turn to recruiters when their demand for talent in a particular practice area exceeds the supply of candidates they are able to recruit on their own. Law remains a lucrative business, and lost revenue can add up quickly if there are not enough attorneys available to do the work. While search fees can be expensive to a law firm, it is much more expensive for firms to have to turn away work due to a lack of qualified attorneys to handle this work. Most law firms understand that it is a good business decision to budget for using legal recruiters as a supplement to their traditional advertising, which reaches only a fraction of the potential candidate pool. Indeed, firms are also aware that the best attorneys, who are often too busy practicing law to be spending the necessary time on a job search, typically seek out legal recruiters to find them the best opportunities.

- **Not All Recruiters Are Created Equal**

If you fall within the group of attorneys that can benefit from using a recruiter, the next step is selecting a recruiter. In any commission-based business, you can find a wide range of individuals who are eager to work with you. Some will provide you with valuable guidance and earn their commission. Others will earn their commission and provide you with little valuable advice (in some cases, you will get advice that is detrimental).

This is certainly the case with the legal search business. If you are able to work with a search firm, it is critical to be careful in choosing who will represent you when you explore a lateral move. Most important, before you send your resume to a recruiter, make sure the recruiter is someone whom you trust and ask the recruiter a lot of questions about his/her experience, method of recruiting, the types of cover letters he/she writes, and the amount of effort that will be put into your candidacy. You are under no obligation to work with anyone simply because he/she has told you about one of his/her “listings,” especially considering that many recruiters have access to the same positions.

- **Listings Are Important, but They Should Be the Least Important Variable in Choosing a Search Firm**

“Listings” are important in any search business. Prospective candidates want to know that you have potential job opportunities to share. In reality, this is probably the least important benefit of working with a search firm. While search firms often have a number of “unadvertised” positions to discuss with you, it is not difficult to find out who is hiring, particularly in an age when most law firms post their hiring needs on their websites. Rather, the real benefits of working with a search firm are intangible.

- **A Good Recruiter Will Provide You with Valuable Information During Your Search and Can Ensure Your Resume is Reviewed by the Right People**

Making a lateral move can be very stressful because there are many unknowns. If you have only worked for one law firm your entire legal career, you may be uncertain about what to expect when you are interviewed as a potential lateral. Using a recruiter can help you navigate this unfamiliar terrain and eliminate some of the unknowns.

An experienced recruiter has contacts sprinkled throughout the legal community. As a natural result of working closely with the local firms on a regular basis, a recruiter develops personal relationships with the key players who are responsible for reviewing your resume. Thus, a recruiter will make sure that your resume does not fall into a “black hole,” make appropriate follow-ups, and ensure that your resume gets into the right hands.

A recruiter can also provide you with insights into what is really going on in different law firms. For example, a good search consultant can let you know crucial “behind the

scenes” information about the working environment in a particular firm. Is the firm hiring in order to replace a departing attorney or because the practice is growing? Are the people in the group happy or miserable? How often do attorneys leave the particular firm, and for what reasons? Does the firm provide the type of platform you need in order to realize your goals?

More important, a good recruiter can help you to ask the right questions when you are talking to a firm. It is not always easy to ask the difficult questions, and somebody familiar with the process can help you solicit the most important answers in the most tactful manner.

If you are not sure what should be on your resume, a recruiter can help. If you have not interviewed since law school, a good recruiter can run mock interviews with you to ensure that you are prepared for the most common questions. Often, a mock interview will raise unanticipated issues that you will realize need to be ironed out.

If you are fortunate enough to have a skill set that is in high demand, you are likely to discover several firms are interested in meeting with you. A competent recruiter can help you sift through your options and isolate which factors are most important to you. He/She can then discuss with you your 2-, 5-, and 10-year goals and counsel you so that you avoid making a move that does nothing to further these career objectives.

- **Recruiters Can Help You Set the Right Tone in Communicating with a Law Firm**

Finally, having an agent can help you not only obtain more information about the hiring process, but also communicate more effectively with a firm. This can be particularly useful if you find interviewing to be stressful and you are a person who likes to get a lot of information. For example, it can be helpful to have a third party asking the questions if you want to find out important facts about the firm’s compensation system or the firm’s philosophy about pro bono work. This way, you can gather information at an arm’s length without appearing to be overly concerned about your own interests.

Most important, in terms of negotiating an offer, it is very uncomfortable to negotiate with somebody you are trying to impress at the same time. If you are like most attorneys, you will not want to risk “upsetting the applecart” or appearing too self-centered to your future “boss.” Thus, having a recruiter step in and handle the negotiations on your behalf can certainly help to keep the waters calm and make sure you don’t sell yourself too short.

In closing, the legal recruiting business has a lot of individuals who are mainly interested in getting you to make a lateral move so that they can earn a commission. But if you take the time to find out more about the qualifications and reputation of a recruiter before you submit your resume, you may end up working with a knowledgeable agent who effectively represents your interests to prospective employers. And with the advice and counsel of a professional who is interested in helping you build a successful

and enjoyable career as a lawyer, you will never worry about looking back and thinking, “I wish I knew all of this when I started the job search.”



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