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How Legal Recruiters Can Help, Even In a Recession

by K.C. Victor

When the economy is down and tens of thousands of lawyers are unemployed or underemployed, it is natural for lawyers to think that recruiters are obstacles to employment. Likewise, in light of large amounts of available and good legal talent, it is also easy for firms and corporations to believe recruiters should be avoided.

I am sad to report that in traditional and conventional senses, legal recruiters are less crucial to making good hires in times of large supply and little demand. Nonetheless, there remain several ways in which recruiters can be of enormous help for both sides of a transaction, even or perhaps especially in hard times. Those ways are not always obvious.

On the employer side, one obvious way legal recruiters can still be of help in hard times is to find an excellent fit between a lawyer and a position. These matches, as always, depend upon appropriate skill sets and experience as well as common professional values. (Regarding partners in law firms, good recruiter matches also typically depend upon a requisite book of business. Even in good times, service partners tend to be hired through connections and not recruiters.)

In recessions, recruiters can help potential employers by saving them large amounts of time, time which could otherwise be spent trying to advance one's business plan. Seeking lawyers with specific skill sets through word of mouth frequently results in numerous inappropriate inquiries. Lawyers with absolutely no on-point experience send in resumes in a "spaghetti on the fridge" mode. Nonetheless, if a potential employer wants to take the time to cull responses there can be a number of appropriate applicants in among the duds. As always, the more crucial part of finding a good hire is finding someone with a work ethic aligned with the organization's ethos. In hard times, figuring out who that may be becomes more difficult.

People adjust interviewing to get wanted jobs and they adjust more when work is needed. Lawyers are no exception. Sometimes hard times create true and permanent changes in character. Professional turmoil can bring humility where there was once resentment and cooperation where there was once ambitious competitiveness. However, sometimes, either consciously or subconsciously, people who have not fundamentally changed will say what needs to be said to obtain a job. Good recruiters can sort out who has truly become willing to work on a lower rung from who will grumble or try to spring up as soon as possible. We can also decide when someone has learned to be a team player or still believes that group efforts and group rewards are a sham or just a plain bad idea.

During recessions, recruiters can frequently help clients sort out these issues without being involved in the entire search. Depending upon the type and amount of work done, assistance

with what is primarily an organization-directed search can be handled for a negotiated fee. Mistakes can be avoided by consulting with a trusted recruiter who judges both skill sets and character for a living. One of the worst things that can happen within a firm or a legal department is to have an important lawyer profoundly alter her behavior when economic times start to look good again.

There also remain several ways recruiters can help lawyers seeking work in recessions. The most obvious time a search firm can help a lawyer, in good times or bad, is when that search firm is working on a position which is completely appropriate for a candidate seeking placement. Even in deep recessions, hiring through recruiters continues both at firms and in-house.

If you have been told by a recruiter that you are inappropriate for particular position but that you are close to what the client wants (e.g., off by a small level of seniority or missing one sort of non-primary experience), stay in touch. Searches are sometimes moving targets and we recruiters do not always remember to call back lawyers who missed the search parameters. If you are way off the mark, staying in touch, at least about that search, will be useless and may annoy someone you want as an ally, your recruiter.

Another way recruiters can help lawyers in recessions is that many of us are able and willing to become what I think of as minimalist business advisors or coaches. Over the many years I have been a legal recruiter, I have met a handful of extraordinary legal business coaches. I do not know any recruiters who are as good as those people at advising lawyers about how to get, keep and grow clients. However, aside from the best of the best, many of us have all sorts of good advice and suggestions about honing client skills.

We obviously become involved with a lawyer's business plan when we are working on a true search with that lawyer. In all times, but particularly tight times, many of us, perhaps for a fee if much time is involved, are also willing to become intimately involved with a particular lawyer's business plan just because we believe in someone or to make the better connection or because it is the right thing to do for a good person who cannot see the forest for the trees.

While we cannot alter someone's personality (and that rarely happens anyway, except when it is self-directed), we can remind lawyers of the basics. We can emphasize that instead of imploding with anxiety, one should reach out. We can remind lawyers to ask their clients questions; don't assume you know what they want. Especially in a recession, lawyers should help their clients get business or at least make connections they should have. Things do not necessarily come back in direct ways, but many clients are also suffering in this recession and they want to particularly help the lawyers who have helped them.