

Jobs

BY ERIN BINNS

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The ABCs of building a network: attend, talk, & nurture

IN SIX YEARS OF CAREER COUNSELING, I've never known a law student to just fall into the perfect job. Students secure work and realize their professional goals because they actively seek and build relationships with people positioned to guide and help them. According to the NALP, an association for legal career professionals, more recent graduates cite self-initiated contacts and referrals as sources for finding jobs than on-campus interview programs, job fairs, or job postings.

As you go forward in your legal education, you should be acutely aware of how and where you might meet people who can assist you in advancing your objectives. In short, you need to network. Yes, there's work involved in *networking*, but the process of building relationships is a lot easier than most students expect. You can create an impressive web of connections when you *attend, talk, and nurture*.

Attend and talk. As a student, Amanda attended a health law convention despite the cost and the fact that none of her friends were willing to go with her. Committed to getting something out of the experience, Amanda went to the social functions, stood by the breakfast buffet and chatted with people as they waited in line, and shook hands with and introduced herself to lawyers, doctors, and hospital administrators.

Amanda, now a practicing health law attorney, recalls, "There weren't many students at the convention so I impressed people by just being there. Several lawyers asked for my résumé, so I e-mailed it to them, and not long after, people I hadn't even met were contacting me because someone forwarded my résumé. For a while, I lost control of my own job search, in a good way."

Jessica is interested in working in the motor sports industry after she graduates. Last year she headed to the "Get into Racing Seminar" in Charlotte, North Carolina. Jessica introduced herself to lawyers, publicists, crew chiefs, and a host of other NASCAR personnel. In the process, she developed connections that led her to executives and lawyers from Indianapolis to Los Angeles. Jessica also received direction on how to sell her legal experiences and education to a largely non-JD audience.

Amanda and Jessica aren't exceptional. They simply sought out places where they would be exposed to people in the industries they wanted to work in and initiated conversation. You need to do the same.

The ABA Annual Meeting, the Equal Justice Works Conference, and continuing legal education courses sponsored by various groups within the ABA and state and local bar associations offer terrific opportunities for you to introduce yourself to potential mentors and future employers. Consider not only attending events, but also volunteering to work at them. Sit at the sign-in table, hand out programs, man the coat check, or shuttle speakers from airports to conference locations. In doing so, you have a purpose in greeting and talking with attendees, with the residual benefit of impressing and getting to know them.

Building a network of professional contacts doesn't require you to go far. You likely don't have to leave your law school. Check your school's calendar of events and you'll find it's loaded with programs and functions that bring lawyers and judges to you. Plan to meet and impress visiting professionals. Wear business casual attire and stay after programs and introduce yourself to presenters. Inquire how you can follow up with them regarding your interest in their work and comments they made during the presentation. With minimal effort you can create a dynamic with these lawyers so that they are actually expecting your phone calls and e-mails.

Law school alumni events also offer close-to-home opportunities for networking. Volunteer to work alumni reunions and golf outings. These events are swarming with supporters of your school, and the relaxed environments allow for casual conversation that formal, informational meetings don't always foster. Do appreciate the context in which you're making connections. Lawyers attend reunions to catch up with classmates, not to accept résumés from eager students. Leave your résumé at home.

Attending law-related events is vital to your networking success, but networking opportunities exist in less obvious places as well. You needn't paste a sign to your forehead reading, "Law student—please help." But you should casually and naturally in the course of conversation let people know what you're up to.

Debra was a covert law student. For over a decade her focus was the care of her family and home, and when she decided to enroll in school, she didn't tell anyone. Convinced by her career counselor (me) that she needed to start talking, Debra sat in church the following Sunday and when the elderly woman seated next to her inquired how she was doing, Debra responded that she was a little tired because she was up late the night before reading her property law assignment. The woman was delighted to learn Debra was a law student. Her late husband was a well-regarded lawyer. Debra left church with two legal contacts. One of these contacts later offered her a law clerk position that ultimately matriculated into a full-time offer.

Another student I spoke with shared his story of the power of the *Bluebook*. This student spends significant time traveling between the Midwest and California, as he's in one location and his fiancée in the other. His self-proclaimed "best networking strategy" is keeping the *Bluebook* on his lap while in airports and on planes. "The book is like an attorney magnet. Lawyers approach me all the time and talk about their law school experiences and ask about mine. When the conversation is good, I write down the person's name or get a business card so I can follow up with an e-mail."

Small, deliberate actions that introduce you to others and positively impact your job search . . . this is networking. And you can and should be doing it.

Nurture. Introducing yourself to members of the legal community is important. Cultivating business relationships after initial introductions is the necessary next step. When you meet lawyers, get their business cards or confirm their names and follow up with correspondence and phone calls thanking them for their time and requesting informational meetings.

As you progress through your legal education, continue to reach out to lawyers and professionals who have shown an interest in your career and education. Send personalized, brief e-mails at the beginning or end of semesters updating contacts as to noteworthy additions to your résumé such as academic standing, journal experience, internship placement, and scholarships. Keep people in your network informed of your career goals and the steps you're taking to achieve them.

In addition to communicating your personal successes and activities, follow what your contacts are up to. Send congratulatory notes to business acquaintances being recognized for professional and community contributions. Read recent publications of lawyers who are part of your network and contact them with compliments and comments. Follow and invest in their careers as you hope they will in yours.

Most students don't enter law school with an arsenal of professional contacts and well-connected family and friends. You need to deliberately position yourself to meet lawyers and take time to establish meaningful relationships. When you commit to networking, you'll be the beneficiary of information, direction, and endorsements. And these are important ingredients of an effective job search.

SIDEBAR:

More Tips on Networking

For more information, check out the following articles previously published in *Student Lawyer*:

“Don’t Deny Yourself the Benefits of Networking” by Erin Binns,
www.abanet.org/lisd/studentlawyer/dec07

“After On-Campus Interviewing” by Kathleen Brady,
www.abanet.org/lisd/studentlawyer/nov07

“Good Questions Are Crucial for Info Interviews” by Erin Binns,
www.abanet.org/lisd/studentlawyer/jan07

“When Networking, Use the Right Kind of Correspondence” by Erin Binns,
www.abanet.org/lisd/studentlawyer/nov06

“Networking Is One of the Best Ways to Identify Jobs” by Donna Gerson,
www.abanet.org/lisd/studentlawyer/dec05

Also check out the highly recommended book *Building Career Connections: Networking Tools for Law Students and New Lawyers* by Donna Gerson (NALP, 2007).