

## Jobs

### How to get good legal experience in a bad economy

by Erin Binns

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I RECENTLY MET WITH A STUDENT wearing a T-shirt that read: “Will litigate for food.” The economy is bad, but it’s not *that* bad. The early ‘90s are proof that the legal profession can withstand hard economic times, so don’t be too quick to barter your services for food and shelter.

Bad economies generate legal work. Lawyers practicing in areas of bankruptcy, foreclosures, and receiverships are busy. Business litigation can see a boom during tough times because companies find themselves unable to perform contractual obligations. Burgeoning breaches set the stage for increased arbitration and litigation. And criminal activity tends to rise as the economy falls, leaving defense attorneys and prosecutors with increased caseloads. Many areas of law remain largely unaffected by the economy. Custody disputes, wills and probate, personal injury litigation, insurance defense litigation, and workers’ compensation claims are fairly insulated from the woes of Wall Street.

This doesn’t mean it’s a bright and sunny day and you can relax about finding a job. Positions aren’t plentiful, and the market is competitive. Funding for government and nonprofit jobs is sparse or frozen. And employers recruiting last fall hired conservatively. This means spring welcomes an impressive and sizable group of law students looking for summer clerkships.

If your goal is to get legal experience this summer, you need to be open-minded about what you’re willing to do and where you’re willing to do it. And you need to market yourself effectively and aggressively.

**Accept that all legal experience is good legal experience.** Start your job search with employers closely matching your practice interests and location preferences. Just don’t stop there. Holding out for on-point substantive experience isn’t practical in a competitive market. Look for positions that will develop fundamental and transferable skills. If your goal is skill and résumé enhancement, it doesn’t matter whether or how much you’re paid, whether the position is full time, part time, or project based, or whether the work parallels exactly your post-graduation practice plans.

Be flexible and open-minded. A summer spent volunteering at a district attorney’s office doesn’t look any different on a résumé than a stipend-funded position at the same office. It feels different in your checking account, but the value to your résumé is unaltered. If you have an eye toward negotiating and drafting contracts, embrace the idea that there’s a lot to be learned about business transactions as they unravel and are litigated. Not convinced? Consider why most first-year Contracts classes are taught using casebooks.

Don’t ignore opportunities because you’re concerned about getting stuck in a professional niche. A single summer’s experience won’t dictate your future. Your long-term goals may not include Chapter 7, but three months with a bankruptcy firm give you access to complex issues of federal law, research and writing projects, and practicing lawyers who are positioned to be future recommenders and mentors.

You also need to think broadly about where you’re willing to work in terms of geography. You shouldn’t attempt an “I’ll go anywhere and do anything” job search. It’s impractical and unmanageable. But neither should you unnecessarily limit your options because you don’t want the inconvenience of a short-term relocation. Living with mom and dad may not top your list, but if a hometown connection leads to an opportunity, consider it. Building a résumé with any type of legal experience is important—especially if the economic slump continues.

**Prepare to market your skills to a defined audience.** Before the first résumé is sent, you need to know your strengths, refine your message, and be ready to sell your candidacy with enthusiasm and conviction. In a tough economy, the task of distinguishing yourself positively from the crowd is absolutely essential.

The least effective way to set yourself apart is to mass mail your résumé and a one-size-fits-all cover letter to every lawyer in the phone book. Hiring is about fit. I know I just told you to be open-minded, which is important, but every job search needs focus.

Recruiting goals don’t change in turbulent economic times. Employers are always committed to hiring the best candidate. Typically the “best candidate” is defined as the applicant whose skills, interests, motivations, and personality complement the employer’s culture and work. Your job is to convince them you’re it.

Start with self-assessment. What are your strengths? What skills do you have that will impress employers? What specific examples of past behavior and successes—academic, athletic, work-related, per-

sonal—evidence these strengths? Don't assume your résumé will speak for itself. You must articulate precisely and personally in letters and during interviews what your strengths and skills mean for the employer. Career services staff can guide you as you work to clarify what you have to offer and how you're going to package the message.

Another important step in getting a position is defining your target audience. Who do you want to work for? Generate a list of possible options based on employer type, practice area, and location. Be cognizant of when one preference trumps another. Identifying employers of interest is important in every job search you conduct. A competitive market simply requires a willingness to make a more exhaustive list and to enthusiastically consider the options at the bottom of it.

**Be proactive.** Self-initiated contacts and referrals dominate methods of securing work in good economies, so you can be certain these proactive measures are important now. Most opportunities aren't posted, and those that are tend to attract a lot of applicants, which makes them hyper competitive. Apply to posted opportunities but not to the exclusion of conducting a proactive job search.

Proactive job searches require you to be aware of how you're marketing yourself and to whom. Once you've defined these factors, you should send cover letters and résumés unsolicited to employers. Is this effective? Absolutely, if you're able to write letters that address specifically what you have to offer and how it matches the employer's practice. Make connections that resonate with the employer and your "cold" letter gets a lot warmer.

How many letters should you send? That depends on geographical limitations and how badly you want a job. A tough job market means you'll need to send more letters and have more interviews in order to get a single offer.

Networking and informational interviews are required. Personal connections and endorsements have great value in competitive job markets. Identify family, friends, law school classmates, professors, former coworkers, teammates, and neighbors who are positioned to assist you by providing ideas about or contacts in the legal communities you're focused on. Attend law school events and programs that bring lawyers and judges to campus. You need to put a face and personality to your job search. People are more inclined to help and hire individuals they know and like.

**Commit to flawless execution.** When employers have abundant choices in candidates they look for reasons to discard applications. Don't make it convenient for them. Cover letters need to be well-written, concise, persuasive statements articulating fit and highlighting relevant skills and strengths. Résumés should be aesthetically appealing and free from typos and inconsistencies in formatting. Interviewing skills should be polished.

Every interaction you have with a hiring lawyer needs to showcase your professionalism. If you indicate in a correspondence that you plan to follow up by a certain date, do so. Keep electronic communications formal and respectful. Salutations and general rules of punctuation do matter.

Shelter employers from your anxiety about not yet having an offer. Refrain from repeatedly calling lawyers and leaving messages and sending e-mails inquiring about their decision-making timeline. Employers don't rush to make decisions when qualified candidates are bountiful. Offers may not come until late spring and summer.

Tight job markets are bad for students, not employers. Students need to be less discriminating, while employers can be more so. You can be a standout applicant and get offers for employment if you commit to considering an expansive list of opportunities and conduct a job search that's on-message and proactive.