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IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

THE ART OF THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

Informational interviews aren't just career changers. Often thought of as a tool for students or recent graduates seeking information about potential careers, the informational interview can be just as helpful to lawyers who have been practicing for years. Lawyers looking to develop a new practice area or to improve their overall job satisfaction should employ this often-overlooked technique.

"It's absolutely necessary to do, particularly if you're looking at an area of law practice that you're not that familiar with," says attorney Hindi Greenberg, who counsels attorneys through her consulting business, Lawyers in Transition. "Rather than jumping from the frying pan into the fire, you want to gather information," Greenberg says. "Talk to people who are already doing that kind of work who can give you some insights into the benefits and detriments and how to best position yourself so you can present yourself appropriately."

Don't Expect an Offer

Richard Bolles, author of the well-known general career guide *What Color Is Your Parachute?*, is widely credited with popularizing the concept of the informational interview. The sessions are described as informational because, by definition, they are not expected to result in job offers from the people or organizations providing information. They are, however, expected to offer insight from experienced attorneys to help determine whether a particular practice area would be a good fit and, if so, how to qualify for a job in the field.

The easiest way to arrange an informational interview is through acquaintances – friends, family members, professors, neighbors, or even strangers you've chatted with at professional conferences or the local supermarket. Of course, lawyers who are already practicing should be discreet about whom they talk to, Greenberg points out,

since they don't want to broadcast their discontent to their employer. Through trusted friends, however, an attorney can usually find appropriate lawyers to interview, she says, and the information gained can be very useful.

A good place to start, even for those who graduated years ago, is your law school's career office, Greenberg suggests. Most maintain lists of alumni willing to talk about their careers and can provide names of alumni in specific geographic locations and practice areas. Many lawyers feel that they have benefited in the past from advice offered by seasoned practitioners and are happy to return the favor by advising others, she says.

When making the first call, say that you're trying to find out what the climate is in the local area for whatever practice area you're interested in, and ask whether the person has any suggestions about how you might go about getting into that field. An e-mail or letter may be more appropriate if the contact is a complete stranger. Attaching a résumé may make it look like a job application. Instead, bring your résumé to the interview and ask the practitioner for suggestions about how it can be improved. If you don't receive a response to your letter or e-mail, follow up with a phone call to ask for an appointment to talk.

What Do You Talk About?

Use the interview to ask for information not readily available online or in career guides. For example, ask the attorney why she decided to go into her practice area and how she got started. What does she like and dislike about the job? How is the field likely to develop in the future? "The last question always is, 'Are there some other people that I should talk to?'" Greenberg says. And, if so, "May I use your name when I call?" An appropriate time limit might be 20 minutes, unless the lawyer granting the

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interview extends the session or invites the interviewer to lunch.

One mistake some lawyers make is trying too hard to sell themselves. That puts the focus on the wrong person. The subject of the conversation should be the interviewee's experience in practice.

Most people can benefit from practicing on their friends or family. If the thought of contacting strangers for information makes you break into a cold sweat, practice will help you immensely. Role playing can give you a little more confidence and comfort.

Following up after the interview is key to making the most of the opportunity. Send a thank-you note, preferably handwritten. Further follow-up at appropriate intervals may help establish a continuing connection. This can be a good opportunity to let the original contact know that you followed up with another suggested contact and how helpful it was.

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