

Applying for your first legal job:

How to stand out from the crowd

With hundreds of law students graduating every year, the job market is becoming ever more competitive. Firms are swamped with resumes from law graduates. You may have excellent academic results, but so do many others. Now that an economic downturn is taking its toll on the employment market, it's more important than ever to stand out from the crowd.

What can you do to make your application stand out amongst others? Academic achievement alone is not enough to differentiate yourself. Employers are busy; they only have time to scan resumes quickly. If there's nothing in your resume that grabs their attention, they will put it aside and move on to the next resume, or the next pressing task.

Added to this is the risk inherent in a firm employing a newly-qualified lawyer. Before you can start work, the employer has to pay a large amount in professional indemnity insurance. They'll have to train and supervise you. And initially you'll earn less for the firm than you receive by way of salary. Is it any wonder many firms prefer to employ experienced lawyers? Although the salary is higher, hiring someone who already knows how to do the job lowers the firm's risk considerably.

So how do you lower the risk for an employer and persuade them to at least meet with you? What is different and special about you that would make you "a good bet"?

An employer will only be interested if you demonstrate that you have something that the employer is looking for. In a market where few jobs are advertised, this presents a problem. How can you know what they might be looking for? Even when a position is advertised, there are often no published selection criteria. So there's some guesswork involved in working out what they are looking for, although you can gain some clues from web sites, brochures and talking to people.

Generally, private law firms are looking for lawyers who are going to be reliable, work hard, perform the work competently and profitably, get along with the staff and clients, and ultimately help to bring business into the firm. They are looking for people who are committed to a career in the law. Your application must communicate that you have qualities of this type.

Don't go around begging for a job, any job. You'll only look like a desperado. No one will give you a job as a favour or to "give you a go". They'll only hire you if they can see that you have something that will be of value to them. Present yourself as a person with a focus. Show that you have at least some idea of what you would like to do with your life. A statement of career objectives can get the reader's attention, as long as it is not too general. And thinking about your career objectives is a good starting point for job seeking. Have you really thought about what sort of career do you want? How do you want to use your legal knowledge?

Your application must answer the employer's question: "What have you (the applicant) got that I (the employer) can use?" No doubt you have plenty of positive personal qualities. Your challenge is to persuade the employer of these. Most graduates say that they have qualities such as:

- communication skills
- ability to work individually or in a team
- attention to detail
- energy, drive, enthusiasm and initiative
- ability to handle pressure
- leadership skills
- Time management skills.

Try to be a bit more original. Also, bare assertions of this type appear to be entirely self-serving. Where's the evidence to justify your assertions? What have you done that demonstrates these qualities? How did you acquire these abilities? Don't leave it to the reader to draw the right conclusion. Make the link for them. Illustrate your point with examples. Show how you acquired the skills you claim to have.

For example, you might say something like: "Working at McDonalds taught me how to communicate well with all kinds of people, and to deal calmly with customer complaints."

General presentation tips

Don't shout for attention with coloured paper, unusual fonts, fancy borders etc. These can make the document more difficult to read. And there is a risk that your own taste in presentation will not match that of the person reading your application.

If you include a photo, choose a picture that shows you dressed for work, not ready for a nightclub.

Proof read your resume and letter carefully. Don't make the slip of telling one firm you'd like to work for some other employer!

Your resume

Tailor your resume for each separate position. You'll need to emphasise different things depending on what the employer is looking for. Keep a record of which one you sent to each firm.

Don't make the reader hunt for information. Provide the information that the employer expects to see, in the order they would expect it to appear. List your qualifications in reverse chronological order. Make sure your date of admission is prominently featured.

Your work history also should appear in reverse chronological order. If a position was a short-term one, state how much time you spent working there, e.g. “25 hours per week”, or “two weeks full-time”.

If you have undertaken legally-related work, list the types of work you have done. Spell this out in some detail, so that your resume is weighted towards work experience that is directly relevant to the employer. If you don't mention a particular type of work, the employer will assume that you have not done it. If the list is long, attach it as an annexure.

It is not essential to include a section on interests. Most interests listed on resumes are not at all relevant to the job. But they may provide a talking point at the interview. If you do include interests, describe them in an interesting way, rather than just short dot points. For example, instead of “films” say “films, especially documentaries about World War II.”

Your referees

Obtain their permission before naming them. It is embarrassing for everyone if the referee is surprised to receive a call from an employer. People with whom you have worked, who know your work and what you're like to work with carry more weight than purely character referees.

Your covering letter

The purpose of your letter is to make the reader want to read your resume. The employer also will be looking to see if you can write a decent letter.

Present a persuasive reason for applying to this employer. Most people will say that it's because of the firm's prestige and excellent reputation – but that just sounds sycophantic. If you have really thought about it, your reasons will be different for different employers, and your reasons will be different from other people's reasons. In any event, you must be ready to explain your reasons at interview.

Keep your letter to one page in length. Make it succinct – if it's too wordy the reader may lose interest. Try to encapsulate what's interesting and different about you.

Address your letter to a named person, and make sure you have spelled their name correctly.

Successful job hunting!