

CAREER MOVES

Contemplating a **change**? Consider using a headhunter to get the most from your job search, but make sure you choose one who acts with your **needs** in mind.

*By Amy Bentley
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Delia Swan recounts a true, but all too familiar tale:

An associate wanting to switch firms seeks the help of a headhunter. The headhunter faxes the associate's resume "all over the city," with no cover letter to introduce the associate to potential employers. As a result, the associate comes off as desperate and unprofessional and, more important, without a new job.

Swan, founder of **Swan Legal Search** in Los Angeles, says the associate was smart to use a headhunter but could have been a bit savvier in choosing a good one.

Swan, along with four other legal recruiters based in Los Angeles and the Bay Area, offer their tips on how to find a reputable headhunter – and get the most from your job search.

Do Your Homework

Before selecting a headhunter, check his or her credentials.

Obtain references, research online to see what's been written about the headhunter and his or her firm, and question the headhunter on how he or she plans to conduct your job search, Matt Feuer of McClure & Feuer in San Francisco says.

Also, Feuer advises that you ask the headhunter about the percentage of attorneys he or she has placed in the past several years.

Seek headhunters with a wide range of contacts at large and small firms, and call some law firms to see which headhunters those firms use.

"Some recruiters are really pretty sleazy. Do your homework," says Feuer.

Joan Fondell of Russo & Fondell in Los Angeles agrees that thoroughly checking out a headhunter pays.

"Take the time to find the right recruiter who takes a careful, conservative approach to the search," Fondell, a recruiter for 14 years, says.

Avoid using a headhunter who found you through a cold call, Fondell also says. Often, a headhunter who resorts to cold calls has the least experience and the fewest contacts. Fondell says that 85 percent of her lawyer clients are referred to her search firm.

Finally, ask for an in-person meeting with the headhunter.

"If the recruiter doesn't take the time to meet the candidate face to face, the recruiter is telling the candidate, "I don't think you're worth meeting," Fondell says.

Be Candid

Once you have selected a headhunter, it's time to open up. And, as with most things in life, honesty is the best policy when mapping out your job search with the headhunter.

First, discuss candidly with the headhunter what you are looking for in a

new work environment. Do you want to move from a large to a small firm? Looking for a laid-back firm culture? Prefer the Westside to downtown? Your headhunter will want to know these details.

"You don't want to replicate the things in your new situation that you didn't like in your old situation," Valerie Fontaine of Seltzer Fontaine Beckwith in Los Angeles says.

Next, tell the headhunter if you have sent your resume to or interviewed with a firm, Feuer says. This way, the headhunter won't send your resume again to the same firm.

Similarly, Fontaine says you must tell the headhunter if you have left your most recent law firm. She recalls how trouble arose when a prospective employer called an associate she represented at work, only to learn from the receptionist that the associate no longer worked there.

Such a surprise can kill an offer, Fontaine, a 20-year legal recruiter, says.

"It shows they're not honest, that they may not have great judgment," she says of the job-hunting associate.

Furthermore, don't hide blemishes in your background, such as failing the Bar exam on the first try or being fired from a previous job, Jon Escher, a co-founder of Solutus Legal Search in Palo Alto, says.

"If it comes out later – and it always will – that makes it look like the candidate was not forthcoming," Escher, who has worked in the legal recruiting industry for 10 years, says. "Nothing sinks a candidacy faster than a surprise at the end of the process."

If your headhunter knows why you were dismissed from your previous firm, for example, he or she can devise a damage-control plan and put a positive spin on something potentially negative, Escher says.

Be Selective

A headhunter should never send out your resume en masse or without your permission. Mass mailings usually result in your resume ending up at the wrong kind of law firm where you would not be happy working.

"Be careful," Feuer says. "These career moves are really important. There's nothing worse than being at a job you don't like."

Fondell says the blanket mailing of resumes also increases the chances that your boss or others inside your firm will discover you are on the job hunt.

"It's an ineffective and unprofessional approach," she says of mass mailings.

Fondell recalls a story from a desperate associate. The associate had used another headhunter first. The headhunter mailed out 40 resumes for the associate, far too many for a city that didn't have that many openings at the attorney's year level. Beware: Hiring managers have their own grapevine. As a result, the associate did not get any interviews.

A dozen to 15 mailings would have been better, Fondell says, and she says she'd expect five or six interviews and two or three job offers from them.

Take Charge

While you certainly should rely on the headhunter's expertise, never forget that you remain in charge of the job search.

To that end, headhunters suggest you keep careful notes of what you are doing on your own to help your job search. They also suggest that, if you are relying on more than one headhunter, you keep careful notes of where each headhunter has sent your resume and which law firms they have scheduled your interviews with.

"They do need to keep accurate track of that," Fontaine says.

Never let a headhunter do anything during a job search, like sending your resume to a law firm, without your consent, **Swan** says.

"You'd be surprised how many young attorneys fall prey to unscrupulous recruiters," she says.

The bottom line, Feuer says, is that it's your career at stake. Don't give up control.

Get The 'Full Story'

Ask your headhunter a lot of questions, particularly about the law firm to which he or she is sending your resume.

"No firm is perfect, let's face it," Escher says. "Candidates should be skeptical of recruiters who only talk of the good parts. This isn't a sales pitch. Candidates should go in with their eyes open."

When a law firm schedules you for an interview, make the headhunter explain in detail the position.

"Require the recruiter to prepare you," Feuer says.