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## MANAGEMENT

### Lateral Interviews at the Partner Level: What To Say and When To Say It

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**A**s *The American Lawyer* reports, over 2,000 major law firm partners switch firms each year. To move so many partner-level candidates through the lateral recruiting process, law firms spend an enormous amount of time on interviews. Even if we make conservative assumptions about the number of interviews a candidate has with a new firm, and the number of firms a typical lateral-partner interviews with before making a move, the bottom line is that law firms spend many tens of thousands of hours every year interviewing potential lateral-partner hires.

Unsurprisingly, the interview stage of the partner-level recruiting process is the most time-consuming phase of that process. While an initial screening conversation may take place with a single partner at a restaurant or hotel, follow-up interviews usually happen at the prospective law firm and sometimes include multiple interviewers in each session.

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Interviews often involve meeting people from multiple offices of a firm either in person or, increasingly, by video conference. While I inform my candidates to anticipate a half-day of interviews per prospective firm, I also let them know that interviews sometimes happen over several days, and occasionally require visits to several offices of a firm.

Interviews are an important part of the lateral-partner recruiting process because they furnish the candidate and the prospective law firm with opportunities to assess each other in a manner that neither could do through written disclosures alone. Face-to-face meetings are really the only way — albeit a limited and imperfect one — to assay whether there would be a good “fit” between the partner-level candidate and the firm. And interviews also add a personal, sometimes quite informal, aspect to the process of determining how a partner candidate is likely to get on with his colleagues at the new firm.

In each of these respects, partner-level recruiting is very similar to associate-level recruiting. But there is one key difference: the due diligence that firms do on partners primarily relates to their ability to generate business — competence in the courtroom or the boardroom is assumed. Accordingly, during interviews firms often probe partner-level candidates about the book of business that they represent to have, and on the cross-marketing opportunities that

may present themselves based on the firm’s competencies and the partner candidate’s client base. By contrast, associate-level interviews often focus more on assessing legal experience than on ability to build a book.

If you are a law firm partner, you may be thinking of interviews as your chance to shine. A note of caution is appropriate here: interviews are fraught with perils to any candidacy, and it is just as easy to leave a poor impression as to make a good one. Keeping in mind that a partner’s goal at the interview stage of the recruiting process is simply to receive an offer, I am going to furnish some advice that might, at first blush, seem counterintuitive: *the interview process is not a reciprocal opportunity for you and the firm to learn more about each other; rather, you should consider interviews to be your primary means of making a positive impression, in order to receive an offer.*

Help each firm learn more about you, but don’t think of interviews as an occasion to ask probing questions. There will be plenty of opportunity for you and your recruiter to do that *after* you get an offer, or in the context of offer negotiation.

So, if interviews are not really the right occasion for you to ask about the firm, what should you talk about? My first piece of advice is to let your interlocutors set the agenda. If they want to focus on your book of business, then answer as thoughtfully and completely as you can; if, instead, they prefer to talk about more personal matters in order to get to know you, then let the conversation go in that direction. Just keep your goal in mind — getting that offer — and consider interviews to be your opportunity to compete

for the Mr./Ms. Congeniality award.

While you should let your interviewers set the agenda during each conversation, you should also make sure to have several talking points in mind. I advise my candidates to address the following four points in each interview, in order to convey a consistent message:

- *Yourself.* Describe what makes you a great lawyer, a great advocate and a great team player. In other words, talk about yourself purposefully — in order to relate your personal traits to reasons why your interviewers might want you to become part of their firm.

- *Your practice.* Describe who your clients are and why they will follow you to a new firm. Discuss the depth of your relationships with key players at those clients, such as its principals or, if applicable, its general counsel.

- *Business development.* Explain how you source new work from current and prospective clients; ideally, discuss how you acquired some recent clients and matters that you are working on — especially if they would likely come with you were you to move to another firm.

- *Good fit with the firm:* Explore how and why your practice naturally fits with the firm and how joining it would create cross-selling opportunities in both directions.

These four talking points should be easy enough to keep in mind, but if you think you might have difficulty remembering them, make a written note and consult

it briefly before each interview. If you are working with a recruiter, rehearse discussing these points before you interview, and make sure to give a download as soon as practical after you finish at each firm. A post-mortem on each set of interviews will help you prepare for the next round, either at the same prospective firm, or at the next one on your list.

As noted above, poor performance during interviews can imperil an otherwise excellent candidacy. Here are three top pitfalls to avoid when interviewing:

- *Saying the wrong things.* Examples include asking about issues embarrassing to the firm — recent notable departures, malpractice claims and the like. Similarly, criticizing your current firm is strictly verboten: not only does it undercut your posture as someone who would be perfectly contented to stay where you are; it also raises questions about your discretion. After all, if you are willing to criticize your current firm and partners, your interviewers may well wonder whether you would be similarly inclined to criticize their firm if you joined it. And of course, never be the one to raise the subject of compensation, which is a major red flag. If your interviewers bring up the issue, it is appropriate to discuss money in response to their questions, but the real time for that conversation is in the context of negotiating an actual offer — a conversation that is usually better done through a recruiter, whose participation will preserve your positive relationship with the firm even while he or

she negotiates in a hard-nosed manner on your behalf.

- *Failing to say the right things.* Firms expect you to address issues that are critical for them to make an informed decision about your candidacy. Thus, if you neglect to mention cross-selling opportunities presented by your client base, the partners you are talking to may think that such opportunities are nonexistent or insignificant.

- *Not being enthusiastic enough.* There's no need to gush over the possibility of joining a firm, but firms are made of people, and people always like to know that they are wanted. It is important to convey a sense of enthusiasm about joining every firm you talk to; even if you do not ultimately accept the firm's offer, it is far better to have that offer in hand. In other words, interviews are no time to demonstrate reticence; rather, they are an opportunity to show excitement about new professional possibilities.

Interviewing for a partner-level position is not the same as interviewing for an associate position. From the firm's perspective the stakes are much higher, both in terms of dollars and in terms of disruption to client relations and firm administration if the lateral acquisition does not work out. Accordingly, interviews are a critical factor as firms weigh a prospective lateral partner's candidacy. Keeping in mind the talking points presented here will make you a better-prepared candidate, and the better prepared the candidate is, the greater the likelihood of an offer. ■