5 Resume Tips for Lawyers

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What makes a lawyer's resume worth a look?

True story: My first paid job out of law school was obtained largely on the strength of my cover letter. What was my trick? A bit of self-deprecation—specifically, a lazy eye joke.

Now, this was the height of the Great Recession; there were no lawyer jobs, and I was applying for a creative writing job with a large legal marketing company. I had applied to hundreds of positions, and had received little to no interest (not even from a paralegal farm paying $12 an hour). I had reached the breaking point where I must've said— "to heck with it"—or something more descriptive before tearing off a cover letter at midnight and hitting submit.

But that does bring me to my first tip when preparing your legal resume and cover letter: Here are my top resume tips for lawyers.

1. Be a tame version of yourself

The lazy-eyed cover letter worked for me because I was applying to a non-traditional legal job. For those applying to traditional jobs, definitely exercise more caution.

That being said, you don't want to be any old suit plus juris doctorate. Firms get dozens, if not hundreds, of applicants for each position, and unless your doctorate says "Harvard" and is autographed by Barack Obama, you'll probably need to spark their interest with something else. Highlight any interesting or unusual (but still useful) skills, and maybe even hint at a personality in your cover letter.

2. Apply widely

Consider two law students: Both were told by their career services office not to mass mail firms.

One followed their advice. The other didn't. The former worked for Cravath, paid off his debts, and now lives as a hipster musician in Brooklyn, without a care in the world. The other hasn't touched his debt and is having far less fun.

Of course, the one who mass mailed firms was also top of his class and transferred to a top-three school after his first year. You can't mass mail mediocrity and expect to land a Big Law position. But regardless of your class standing, take heed of an old army sergeant's advice: Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Spending a few hours on a mail merge binge may not work, but what do you really have to lose?

3. Bury the boring in the middle

How should you organize your resume? Should you put your education first, or your work experience first?

Bury the boring. But not at the bottom—stick it in the middle.

Why? Primacy and recency. According to a psychological concept called the Primacy Effect, you're more likely to remember that which comes first, e.g., those all-important first impressions. The Recency Effect refers to the idea that you're more likely to remember what just happened—those impressive skills or case outcomes you put at the bottom of the resume will be fresh in a hiring manager's mind when they stop reading.

What about the middle? Stuff your weakest points there. If you went to a mediocre school, or had a mediocre GPA, stick that in the middle and start with work experience. No work experience? Start with education and put the summer clerkships or clinics in the middle.

4. Make multiple resumes

I did work for the Innocence Project in law school. There are parts of the country where, if I were to apply to a prosecutor's job with that on my resume, they'd call me a namby-pamby boy and light my application on fire.

On the other hand, I also was a member of the Federalist Society and president of the law school's firearm, hunting, and fishing club. Public defenders' offices probably view those extracurriculars as a mark of Lucifer himself.

Get the point? It may seem like a pain, but we're really talking about trimming the fine details here—deleting a bullet point or volunteer gig to appease the gatekeepers. You probably don't even need to make one resume per job. Instead, make one per category: one resume geared towards public defenders, another for prosecutors' offices, etc.

5. Don’t apply

I’ve been my own boss. I’ve worked in mid-sized firms. I’ve clerked for solo and small firms. The truth is, the happiest I’ve ever been is as a solo-entrepreneur. I made my own hours. My income was usually proportional to the amount of work I put in. And running your own shop means you can turn fantasies of innovation into action: You could try a new non-profit business model, or run an entirely cloud-based law firm, or simply use your favorite tools and apps without hearing a luddite partner complain that you’re not using decades-old Time Matters.

It’s not for everyone. If you have family obligations, a need for steady health coverage, or some other inflexible reason for needing a steady, consistent paycheck, working for some other attorney or company isn’t a bad outcome.

But don’t feel like getting a job is the only way to make it in the legal industry. I have colleagues who opened their own shops right out of school, or shortly after realizing that they hated firm life, and none of them would have it any other way. Financially speaking, most of them make as much as or more than their firm-employed counterparts.

And, if you’re worried about learning the law, or about figuring out how to practice, consider this: I learned more with a mentor and a six months of my own time than I did in eighteen months in a big firm full of experienced lawyers. A firm with a proper mentorship or training program is a godsend for new attorneys, but it’s not the only way.

Writing the right legal resume

There are plenty of basics to follow when writing a legal resume. Stick to conservative fonts, choose standard margins, and keep it all in black. Also, keep it to one page, (unless you have a really compelling list of publications and speaking engagements that will enthrall the reader and will justify a second page) and proofread, proofread, proofread.

Follow those basics, combined with the resume tips for lawyers above, and you just might stand out from other applicants and land your dream job.

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