

# Interviewing for a Job at an Insurance Defense Firm

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While interviewing young lawyers for associate positions in our insurance defense firm, we have seen many qualified applicants commit the same mistakes over and over again. Basically, they have not prepared themselves adequately because they really do not know what their prospective employer may be seeking. Thus, they do not know enough about the firm's practice interests, have unclear personal and professional goals, and fail to understand the firm's needs. These pitfalls can all be avoided with proper preparation, self examination, and some thought as to the interviewer's perspective on the candidate.

There is the old joke involving the CEO of a corporation who interviews a CPA, an MBA, and an attorney for a job. He hands the CPA a line of figures and asks him "What is the total?" The CPA answers: "\$4,376." He asks the same of the MBA who responds, "\$5,786." He hands the figures to the attorney who responds: "What number do you want it to be?" The attorney was hired.

While this joke is often recited to poke fun at attorneys, it can also be used as a guide to the proper approach to interviewing.

The attorney was hired because he viewed the task from the CEO's perspective, not from his own. Young lawyers commit critical errors when they direct the interview towards *their* wants, their needs, their expectations, and not towards those of their prospective employer. While personal strengths and desires do need to be stated, always remember to put yourself in the managing partner's shoes: "I need a lawyer who can handle this type of insurance defense work, and I need that lawyer *now*."

## PREPARATION: KNOW THE ENEMY

As in any lawsuit, preparation is the key to winning the case. Information is the mother of victory. This is also true of the interviewing process. A young lawyer must do extensive research on the firm, its clients, and the particular partner who is conducting the interview. Fertile sources for this information include: *Martindale-Hubbell*, *Best's Directory of Recommended Insurance Attorneys*, Westlaw, Lexis, and of course, the Internet. If you know someone who is familiar with the firm, do not hesitate to ask about the firm's reputation, and any other information your source may have.

A check of recent lawsuits being handled by the firm should be run, either on one of the computerized research systems or in the clerk's office at the court house. The potential candidate should read at length any published opinions, or other public records, in these cases. Then, at the interview, express interest in the nature and outcome of these cases. At the very least, you should know what sort of subject matter dominates the firm's practice.

If the young lawyer has the advantage of knowing who the interviewing partners are, he or she should investigate their backgrounds. Know their undergraduate schools, law schools, areas of expertise and, presuming you are sincere, express a desire to become involved in that area. For example, if the partner has a special reputation in product liability, the young lawyer looking for a job should be prepared to discuss his or her products litigation experience, views on such central issues as adequacy of warnings and the propriety of punitive damages, and the seminars on developments in products law he has attended recently.

## THE DRESS CODE

The law remains a profession dominated by men and women whose appearance suggests that they take their work very seriously. They dress conservatively, especially lawyers involved in insurance defense, which is by its very nature litigation and courtroom oriented. At any given moment a young attorney can be called to court on a conference or hearing and he or she must be dressed appropriately.

Conservative dress at an interview still is the norm. Unless the Rolling Stones are your clients in an entertainment law firm, most insurance company executives do not appreciate men with bushy beards, facial jewelry, or ponytails. Woman attorneys should not wear multiple earrings, "big hair," excessively long nails (with patterned designs), or "stiletto" high heels. In colder climates, be sure to wear an overcoat; a ski parka over a suit does not give a professional appearance.



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True, clothes are not a measure of your legal talents or abilities. However, the reality is that clients base their initial opinion of a firm to a great extent on the outward appearance of the attorneys. A firm does not want to give the impression that a (present or prospective) client's matters are being handled by inexperienced lawyers fresh out of law school who appear ready for an afternoon of surfing or on the ski slopes rather than serious work.

## THE ACTUAL INTERVIEW

A young lawyer should arrive a few minutes early for the interview, and be prepared to wait. If you walk in the door ten or fifteen minutes after the scheduled hour, the firm's lawyers will assume—to your detriment—that if you are late for an interview it is likely you will be late for court appointments.

While you are waiting, take the opportunity to observe the overall environment of the office. Does it appear to be a well-organized, business-like atmosphere? Is your initial, admittedly superficial, impression a favorable one? Do not, while you are waiting, eat, drink coffee (unless you are offered a cup), or do personal paper work. It looks sloppy.

Have a neat professional looking attaché or folder with several copies of your resume and writing samples to hand to the interviewing committee. If you fail to bring along your resume, the interviewers may assume that you'll forget to bring essential documents to court. Remember to thank the receptionist/secretary before and after your interview.

When entering the conference room or partner's office where the interview takes place remember to offer your hand to the men present (women must first extend their hand) and do not take a seat until you are invited to do so. Although this may sound like an etiquette course, you must remember that your ability to relate to clients and perform in social situations, as well as your legal abilities and enthusiasm, is being evaluated at the interview.

Be sure you do not direct your responses to only one attorney in the interview room. The white-haired partner seated directly across the table may not in fact be the final decision maker.

The most important impression that the young lawyer wants to impart at the interview is that he or she wants to do the sort of work that this firm does. Moreover, he wants to do it at that particular firm. An interview is not the time for career counseling questions or self-analysis. When a partner in an insurance defense firm asks "What kind of law interests you?" the answer is "insurance defense." Of course, other appropriate responses, depending on the character of the firm, could be trial practice, appellate practice, product liability, construction litigation, automobile accidents, or professional malpractice.

Do not state a dislike of any of the firm's practice groups, for example: "While I realize that your firm does a lot of medical malpractice work, I really do not like that field." You will not be useful if the firm cannot use you in all of its practice groups. Other inappropriate responses, at least in a defense firm, would

include: "I want to be a prosecuting attorney, because I love criminal law" and "I find patents and trademarks very interesting." If the firm is a very large one, with a diverse practice, the "smorgasbord approach" may not be out of place, i.e., "I don't yet know what sort of law I want to practice, but I want to try a little of everything."

It would be inappropriate to try to be humorous at any interview or to discuss politics, religion, ethnicity, or sexual preference. Do not comment on personal objects or pictures on the interviewing attorney's desk or in the office. Your opinion of her children's photographs, for example, is not relevant or necessary.

Above all, show enthusiasm and passion for your profession, and at least the potential for a strong, long-term commitment to this particular firm. Demonstrate that you love the law and the law firm environment. The interview is not the place for statements like "I think I might want to try cases, but I may be too shy" or "I'd like to try my hand at litigating and then move on to a government agency where I can formulate policy."

Remember: your ability to communicate with the interviewing committee is a direct reflection of your ability to communicate with the client, the judge, and the jury. Keep steady eye contact; inspire confidence. Try to imagine yourself through the eyes of the managing partner.

Would you proudly introduce this junior associate to a client?

Although required billable hours and the total compensation package are probably foremost in a young attorney's mind, they should not be the focus of the initial questions and discussions with the interviewing committee. Experience, professional growth, and personal satisfaction are your goals. Among your first questions to the committee should *not* be "What is your vacation policy?" but rather "How soon will I be allowed to handle my own caseload?" or "Will I be given the opportunity to try cases?" or other inquiries that indicate you are ready and eager to "roll up your sleeves" and tackle the firm's workload.

## THE CLOSE

There is a basic rule in salesmanship and that is, "Ask for the order." It is one of the hardest steps to take in any business dealing. In the law firm interview setting, "the close" is when you directly ask for the job. You must simply state without hesitation or ambiguity why you feel you are uniquely qualified for the job and why you know that you will work harder than other (presumed) candidates in successfully dealing with the firm's needs. Exude self-confidence without obvious boasting.

A follow-up letter thanking the firm (directed to the chair of the committee) for the interview should be sent immediately. It shows good form and the ability to follow through. You should also follow up with telephone calls to the chair, in which you politely but firmly ask for a deadline for the firm's hiring decision. For a fuller acquaintance of the lawyers with whom you may work—and vice versa—attempt to see them in other settings such as speaking engagements, alumni gatherings, or bar association events.

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Frequently, the reason a particular young lawyer is not hired is his or her lack of experience. If you are rejected for this reason by the firm of your choice, find a job elsewhere, perhaps with an insurance company. Then, if you are still interested in the firm a while later, re-apply. A law firm's needs ebb and flow; often, it is merely timing that determines who gets hired and who does not. When you have had several months of insurance defense work in another setting, write to the firm and emphasize your broader experience level.

### **SUMMARY**

The devil approached a young lawyer and asked: "Are you tired of making no money? Sick of not being respected like your cousin the doctor? Frustrated by the long hours?" The young lawyer answered, "Yes." The devil stated: "OK. Here's my offer: \$1 mil-

lion a year income. Penthouse in Manhattan. Private jet. Ocean-side mansion. A two-week vacation every other month. Gorgeous companions of your choice. And in return all I ask for is your eternal soul."

The young lawyer eyed the devil. He concentrated, then he sighed and asked "OK, what's the catch?"

We do not advocate selling your soul to the devil during a job interview, however, we do advise the following:

- Know the prospective employer.
- Respond to the firm's needs, not your own.
- Be calm and confident at the interview.

Remember: the firm is looking for hard working, directed, dedicated individuals, who are ready, willing, and able to do the work the firm needs done. Project an image of maturity, professionalism, and dedication—and the job may well be yours. ■