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Build on Your Law School Success

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Build on Your Law School Success

Many of the skills you used to gain admission are the same ones needed to further your career after graduation, explain Angela Dalfen and Leeor Neta of Golden Gate University School of Law.

Angela Dalfen and Leeor Neta

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Much — perhaps too much — has been written about the skills one needs to obtain a legal job. From our point of view as administrators on either end of the law school experience, it is clear that many of the attributes sought by law school admissions committees are akin to those sought by prospective employers. We counsel students and attorneys to consider how the "soft skills" they relied on to gain entry to law school will serve them equally well as job seekers.

Discipline

Admissions committees need to discern which students have the ability to thrive in what will likely be their most demanding academic program to date. It takes discipline to prepare for and concentrate in class every day when the exam is three months away and consistently avoid distractions while studying. The disciplined student welcomes such a challenge; it is not surprising that she tends to perform well in a law school's competitive environment.

It can be daunting to think about career planning when the demands of the first year of law school are so overwhelming. Each November, the counselors in our career services office, or CSO, meet with first-year students to assess each student's accomplishments, qualities and values; suggest resources for exploring career interests and internships; and draft a 1L career development plan.

A few students respond to this type of planning with uncertainty or, worse, blank faces. Stressed out by their coursework, they avoid the CSO and do not seek opportunities outside the classroom. As a result, they gain little practical experience during law school and are underprepared for legal practice.

Thankfully, many students respond to these meetings with enthusiasm. They quickly start thinking about their long-term goals, what internships will prepare them for law practice, and what skills to develop and highlight in their job applications. They remain in regular contact with the CSO. They figure out how to earn good grades while taking advantage of extracurricular activities and clinical placements. As soon as they obtain their first internship, they start planning for their next one. They also tend to perform well in unfamiliar work settings.

The key is discipline. The disciplined law school applicant has a history of strong performance under pressure and is organized and focused on a clearly defined goal. Why not approach a job search with the same gusto?

Resilience

The first year of law school shocks nearly every student. Excellent expository writers experience difficulty with legal writing. Career paralegals get a C in torts.

Some students internalize these setbacks and perceive them as confirmation of their ability (or lack thereof) declaring, "I knew it. I don't belong here." Others greet setbacks with a renewed sense of purpose. "I am looking forward to figuring what I am doing wrong so that I can improve. This is going to be fun."

According to Dr. Carol Dweck in *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, people exercise either a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. The former believe that their intelligence is fixed. As a result, they tend to be very sensitive about being wrong or making mistakes. On the other hand, those with a growth mindset believe they can vastly change their intelligence. They tend to seek out challenges or stretch assignments. And they tend to perceive the people around them — including professors, librarians and other staff — as resources for their own knowledge.

Law students with a fixed mindset tend to delay career planning when they don't perform as well as they would have liked in their first semester courses. They pour all their time and energy into their studies, believing that a singular focus is the key to success. They believe that by blocking out interruptions like student groups, networking events and career counseling, they will improve. In very few cases is this effective.

In contrast, law students with a growth mindset are less likely to isolate themselves. In moments of despair they use whatever assistance is available, like extra training or tutoring. They lean on their community for support. Most importantly, they never lose focus on the ultimate goal, which for any law school graduate should be a strong transcript and an impressive array of legal internships.

A law school candidate whose application evidences a growth mindset — in particular, the ability to rebound from professional or personal failure — will often be more career-ready than one who has sailed through life without a bump. Similarly, a job seeker who can show how she has successfully overcome challenges will more easily convince a hiring manager that she will not get derailed by the inevitable roadblocks that characterize the early stages of a legal career.

Charisma

Lawyers depend on their ability to persuade others. Litigators spend their careers persuading clients, judges and (when possible) opposing counsel. Transactional lawyers rely on their abilities to cajole clients and other attorneys. This should make sense to anyone who was once advised to pursue a law degree because he enjoys a good argument.

Someone who maintains positive connections with friends and colleagues, is up to date on current events and can make conversation easily, and who is pleasant and fun to be around will almost always have an edge in a selective application process. This is especially true in the legal community, where so much of our work depends on our professional reputation and network.

Some law schools allow applicants to interview in person for a seat in the class. Others invite applicants who have been placed on the waitlist to visit the campus and meet with an admissions counselor. Any admissions professional can recall at least one applicant who was admitted because he or she had a winning personality, an "x factor" that trumped a questionable LSAT score or college GPA. Sometimes those traits are evidenced in a sharp, pithy personal statement. Other times an applicant meets with a faculty member who later calls the dean of admissions and says, "I don't care what her LSAT score was, she'd be perfect here." Once a candidate has been deemed qualified, a degree of subjectivity typically exists in graduate and professional school admissions. The same is true in professional-level hiring.

Ability to Rally Supporters

All law school applicants are required to submit letters of recommendation. What that means is that at some point in the past five years every new lawyer had to communicate to at least two influential people in his life — a professor, clergy member, supervisor, coach — that he was about to enter a competitive application process and needed them to vouch for him. Chances are good that a new lawyer who has completed internships or performed decently in the classroom has at least one or more professors or lawyers who have agreed to serve as references.

We advise job seekers at every stage of their careers to keep those references up to date about their most recent achievements and where they are applying to work. Ideally, your current references could (if asked) write a letter as detailed as the ones that you submitted with your application to law school.

It's awkward to tell people that you are job searching, and even tougher to ask for help. (Unfortunately this part never gets any easier.) But nearly everyone who is currently employed was at one time unemployed and/or needed a boost from somebody who believed in them. Asking people who are connected to the legal market for help, encouragement, introductions and guidance is part of becoming a confident, savvy professional. Developing a team of supportive people who know you well

and are committed to your professional success will contribute greatly to your job search and overall sense of purpose as you make your way in the first few years of practice.

Belief in Oneself and One's Choices

Many people have difficulty talking about their accomplishments and abilities. We often see law school applications where the applicant's humble personal statement makes little mention of a superb professional resume or a prestigious award. We recently began doing an exercise during orientation week where we ask the students to describe three of their greatest accomplishments and three of their most salient personal qualities. We were surprised to find that some students don't bother mentioning their admission to law school.

While it may sound obvious, being able to articulate what makes you special will distinguish you from a lot of equally qualified candidates. One of the interview questions asked of Equal Justice Works Fellowship finalists is: "What is the greatest skill that you would bring to your proposed project?" Many applicants express doubts about how best to answer this question, even where the answer is plain to everyone around them.

A job seeker cannot be her own best advocate if she does not also take pride in the choices she has made in her career: what law school to attend, what internships to accept, what area of specialization to pursue. Who would want to hire someone who expressed shame or insecurity about such important professional decisions? An astute interviewer would probably wonder if his or her organization was going to end up being another disappointing stop on that individual's career path. The best applicants have a history of making careful, thoughtful choices, and of being enthusiastic spokespersons for any institution or employer with whom they have been associated.

Of course it is difficult to take pride in yourself and your choices if you are also having trouble finding work that is a good match for your skills and interests. Resist the urge to lay blame or complain. Save expressions of self-doubt, frustration and financial woes for a small circle of close friends and family members, and display poise and confidence to everyone else. What are you doing that is bringing you satisfaction during your job search? Perhaps you are getting to spend more time with an elderly relative or your own children. Maybe you are volunteering for an organization you care about, or taking advantage of free or discounted bar association programming. Employers value the ability to maintain a positive attitude during trying times, and you will benefit from the effort you made to improve your skills and broaden your network while you were between jobs.

We've counseled hundreds of law school applicants and job seekers during our tenure at the law school and can say with authority that the above are traits common to nearly all successful students and new attorneys. A job seeker who can draw on the parts of herself that got her through the application process, into law school, through the first year of classes and ultimately the bar exam is sure to find ample evidence that she has what it takes to meet whatever challenges lie ahead.

Angela Dalfen is the associate dean for admissions at Golden Gate University School of Law. She practiced plaintiff-side employment law for several years before becoming a law school administrator. Leeor Neta is the director for public interest programs at Golden Gate University School of Law. He founded the City of East Palo Alto's first juvenile diversion program and served for two years as its executive director. He has also worked for the state public defender's office and Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr.



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