

3 Little Things to Help You Stand Out

Career Development





Whenever I speak at law schools or to our intern classes, I am asked for advice on getting a job. I always tell them to focus on doing the little, basic things that help them show up in the best way. This becomes even more important as the continuing fallout from the COVID-19 crisis is causing summer associate and new hire roles to evaporate in frightening volumes. With depressing frequency, I find that too many smart and capable candidates derail themselves by making some elementary mistakes. Give yourself every chance to stand out and succeed by following these simple rules.

Be on time and be prepared

Late for a ZOOM meeting or online interview? Here is what you are saying to your prospective employer: "*My time is worth more than yours*." Can't be bothered to research the company or the job beforehand? "*I don't care enough about this to actually try*."

Recently a candidate for a senior role on our team arrived 15 minutes late, without excuse or meaningful apology. When she showed surprise that her hour with me was now truncated to 45 minutes, I told her she should have been thankful I was still willing to waste the 45 minutes. Needless to say, that was her last 45 minutes with my team.

Show up on time and ready to go. Don't dial into a 1 pm call at 1 pm; dial in at 12:55 pm. In terms of research, advanced preparation is great — nothing gets my attention faster than a well-placed bit of knowledge, or an unusually thoughtful question — but at the very least cover the basics. I don't know how many times I've heard candidates ask me something that was right on our website, or that they could have looked up easily with minimal effort.

I want to fill my team with people who are intensely curious and deeply motivated. When you are late or unprepared for a job interview — your very first chance to showcase yourself — you are broadcasting that you are neither of those things.

Always send a thank you note

This is a simple litmus test for me. Anyone who fails to send a thank you note (or email, or text, or — bated breath — phone call) after an interview is an automatic "no." You can be smart, talented, highly personable, and have all the technical skills and knowledge in the world … but if you lack the basic social intelligence to send a message of appreciation after a job interview, I can't trust your judgment. Not with me, my teammates, our clients, or our customers.

It amazes me that this could even be open for debate, but I have had conversations in the last year with career development professionals who claim that there are employers who are ambivalent about or actually disfavor the thank you note. Really?

There are lots of good columns on why and how to craft a thank you note, and Julie Brush wrote one of the best. For me, a short and sweet three topic structure is perfect: (1) thank you for the time, (2) here's what I learned and why I am a good hire for the role, and (3) I am even more excited now about the opportunity than before. And if you are no longer interested in the role? "Thank you for your time" is still a must-do. It is a small world, and we have long memories.

Ask an old person for help

I've had the honor of speaking at some of the country's top law schools. Here is what struck me the most: that out of all those students, so few made any effort to follow up in any way. I shared my email address and invited a connection, but only a handful reached out afterward.

Here's the thing about asking for help … You might think you are imposing, but if you ask in the right way to someone further along in her career, you are fostering a relationship that offers value on both sides. Asking an old (OK … let's say "older") person for help is one of the most powerful things you can do. People like to be asked for their ideas and like to have the chance to invest in someone more junior. It is flattering to be considered valuable, and the psychological need to, and benefit of, reciprocating that flattery is high.

Obviously, the request has to be commensurate to the relationship. You can't approach a stranger at a lecture and then turn around and ask him to write you a recommendation (which happened to me). But you can ask for insight, or a connection, or advice. But you have to ask. No one is going to do it for you. This is a huge and untapped source of assistance that many job seekers overlook completely.

I worry the job market is going to be so tight and unforgiving for this generation of new lawyers. They are facing years of a fragile and uncertain economy in a historically conservative industry that can shut down its hiring spigot in an instant. Standing out will not be easy. Do not make it harder by ignoring the simple yet meaningful little things.

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