

Building your Network

How to Gain Valuable Legal Experience in a Slow Economy

by DeWarren K. Langley

In life you never know who is going to help you; however, networking increases the number of people likely to help you. Contacts obtained through networking are your single most valuable resource in the job search for internships, externships and full time employment post law school.

Networking is more than simply meeting with professional people. Networking is the art of cultivating relationships with new and old professional and personal contacts to develop and expand your practical competence of the law. Individuals in your network can serve as a strategic resource for acquiring the critical lessons learned only through the practice and administration of the law – knowledge necessary for becoming a skilled and successful attorney.

As mentors, your contacts can provide advice and input on developments in the law, your growth as a legal practitioner, career decisions and connecting you with other professionals in your area of legal interest.

Making the Connection

Some students are fortunate to have parents who have strong networks; others must build their networks from scratch. As law students, we must juggle reading and briefing cases, creating and updating outlines, studying and practicing exams. The academic rigor of the study of law leaves law students with limited discretionary time; thus, networking efforts must be strategic. In addition to the typical avenues of meeting professionals at receptions or speaking engagements, blind networking can be an effective tool.

Blind networking is making contact and establishing a relationship with persons of similar interest whom you have not previously met in person. The internet makes connecting with others in this way much simpler for current law students than for previous generations.

For example, let's say you are an aspiring defense attorney and you recently read of a case in the local newspaper where an attorney won a case that seemed extremely difficult to defend. To establish a connection

with the defense attorney, a "Google" search or a search in the N.C. Bar Association membership database will likely reveal the attorney's contact information. After locating the attorney's contact information, you can easily send a short e-mail introducing yourself (name, year in law school, and area of concentration if any), your interest as a defense attorney, what prompted you to contact the attorney and ask for fifteen minutes of their time to discuss the strategy of the case from the local newspaper, information about their career path, and any advice they can provide for an aspiring defense attorney. It is important to include some brief information about yourself in the e-mail; however, do not include your resume with the e-mail.

Blind networking, like any effort, does not guarantee 100% effectiveness. However, many attorneys will return your e-mail when they recall the days of being in your position and realize they have an obligation to assist the next generation of attorneys.

Keep in mind, the purpose of the meeting is not to interview for an internship or job per se but to add the skilled attorney to your network and learn from the attorney's experience in practice. Prior to the meeting, develop questions you plan to ask and information you will share about yourself. During the meeting, take notes of the information shared and pull as much practical information from the attorney as possible. Ask the attorney for information on any opportunities that would be helpful in developing the necessary skills to be an effective defense attorney. One of my frequent questions in meeting attorneys is: "What is the single most important piece of advice you have as I move forward in my career?" Often, the question will yield a number of answers which will be insightful lessons.

After the meeting send a follow up note expressing gratitude for the opportunity to meet and highlight the lessons learned from the meeting. You can also ask the attorney to let you know of any future opportunities to shadow or volunteer with their office.

You should repeat the process by continuously searching for and connecting with

attorneys that practice in the areas of law that interest you. You can search local law firms, read the profiles of the attorneys in the N.C. Bar Association membership directory, or even ask one of your law school professors for potential leads. The N.C. Bar Association membership directory is extremely useful because it allows you to search based on law school attended, geographic area and law practice area.

In addition to searching online, attending local court proceedings is another avenue for observing and learning critical legal practical skills. Attending District Court or Superior Court for just three hours per week will give you first hand exposure to the judicial system. You can take note of the styles, strategies and responses of the attorney, witnesses and judges to gain a comprehensive understanding of the administration of justice. At the conclusion of the proceedings for the day, you could contact the attorneys and/or judge in the case to learn more about court room proceedings.

Regardless of your specific interest in law, making contact and requesting meetings with attorneys and judges will build your network and offer valuable legal experience.

Maintaining your Contacts

Once you have established contacts, you must maintain your connections for the long term by building on the initial meeting and establishing a relationship with your contacts.

For example, in 1994, I was a third grade student at Morehead Elementary School in Durham and then-District Court Judge Elaine O'Neal Bushfan spoke to my class. I connected with her then and maintained contact with Judge Bushfan. Judge Bushfan wrote my recommendation for law school, serves as a great mentor and has introduced me to other judges and attorneys with similar interest of work in civil rights, juvenile law and the public defender's office. On Jan. 2, 2011, Judge Bushfan was sworn in as the first African-American and first woman Superior Court Judge in Durham County.

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One approach is to meet throughout the year by inviting the attorney to lunch. The purpose of such an invitation is two-fold. First, you can share your journey as a law student with the attorney. Second, you can learn from the attorney's experience.

As with any meeting, send a follow up e-mail after the lunch.

Another approach to maintain your con-

tacts is to send biannual updates to your contacts on your academic, professional and personal progress. Updates to your contacts help them identify ways they can be of assistance to you and remain knowledgeable of your growth.

Networking is not merely about creating relationships with spheres of influence. Networking is about building and expanding

your knowledge and growth as a future legal practitioner through the lessons of those who have practiced or administered the law. ■

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