

# Preparing for the Most Common Types of Law Firm Interviewers

Preparing students for interviews is one of the most important goals of the Career Services Office. Having the grades to secure interview spots or networking your way into an interview with your dream employer can be totally wasted if you aren't prepared for the interviews once you get there. One of the challenges we face when preparing students for interviews is that there are many different interviewing styles, and we can't predict which a student will face when they head into any given interview.

In order to help you prepare for all the different interviewer types you may encounter, we've put together our best strategies and advice for dealing with some of the most common interviewing styles used by law firm interviewers. Obviously, not all interviewers will fit neatly into these categories, and many interviewers will use more than one of these styles in the same interview. But it is important for you to be prepared for any of these types of interviews, every time you have an interview opportunity. If you have questions about our preparation tips for these common interview styles, be sure to set up an appointment with one of our counselors.

## **THE TRAINED INTERVIEWER**

The trained interviewer has been educated on effective interviewing strategies and will have a set of questions they want to ask to get at specific issues important to the firm. For example, to test your interest in a long term commitment to the firm, a trained interviewer may ask, "**Where do you see yourself in 10 years?**" as well as subtler questions such as "**What do you think makes a good attorney?**" and "**What type of practice are you interested in?**" The trained interviewer is looking to see if your answers to these questions envision a career at a firm like theirs and to see that you understand what that career will actually be like, not just as a first year associate but as you progress up the career ladder.

The trained interviewer is also the most likely to ask behavioral questions like, "**Tell me about a time you faced a challenge at work and how you overcame it,**" or "**Tell me about a time you went above and beyond the call of duty at work.**" To be prepared for these types of questions, you want to think about experiences at each of your previous jobs, or in school activities, where you faced challenges, made mistakes and had to correct them, worked overtime to get things done, etc.

Even though the trained interviewer is more likely to ask more questions than other types of interviewers, most will leave time at the end of the interview for you to ask questions. They will be analyzing the questions that you ask just as they analyze the answers you've been giving. Be sure to have firm-specific questions ready for these interviewers. If all you ask are generic questions ("Tell me about your summer program."), they may get the impression that you are not specifically interested in their firm. Simply tweaking the question - "I saw on your website that you have an extensive mentoring program as a part of the summer associate experience. Can you tell me more about it?" - shows that you took the time to research the firm and indicates that you are specifically interested in working there.

**PROS:** This is not an interview that you will have to run. The interviewer has an agenda and will ask the questions. This type of interview really gives you a chance to shine - if you have prepared thoroughly, you will be able to respond to the interviewer's questions with highlights from your work and school experiences and why you are a great match for the firm. It is an opportunity to sell the best that you have to offer.

**CONS:** Unprepared students can have trouble if they feel "put on the spot" and become frustrated when they feel that they aren't giving the interviewer the "right" answers. Be sure to check out our handouts for a list of questions to prepare for as well as ideas for questions to ask. Practice both your answers and your questions out loud to make sure that they come out right. Come meet with a counselor in the Career Services Office for a mock interview. Knowing that you have a good answer for even the most daunting question will allow you to go into every interview at your most comfortable and confident.

**SUMMARY:** Prepare answers to a wide range of questions about your short and long term career goals, interests inside and outside of the legal profession, ideas about the law and the legal profession, how your education and experience suits you for the particular employer that you're interviewing with, and how you've excelled and overcome challenges in previous employment and educational settings.

## **THE RESUME REVIEWER**

The resume reviewer has probably not been trained in interviewing techniques or is specifically unprepared to interview you (i.e. did not have time to read your resume before the interview). To make the interview run smoothly, this interviewer will simply run down your resume from top to bottom, asking you questions about each entry: **"Tell me about law school at Loyola"** **"Why did you choose University X for undergrad?"** **"Tell me about working for Judge X this summer"**

**PROS:** In many ways, this is the best type of interview to have. The questions are not challenging and give you the opportunity to talk about the highlights from each entry on your resume. You do need to be prepared to discuss your resume, however, so before your interviews, you should review your resume to make sure that you have something to say about each entry. Do not list positions on your resume that happened so long ago that you can't remember much of what you did. If you have publications on your resume, be sure to review them so that you can speak intelligently about them - if your undergrad thesis was on Henry James, you may run into an interviewer who is a Henry James fan - and you should be prepared to talk intelligently about his work! If the bulk of your work experience prior to law school was non-law related, you will need to think of ways that you can spin those experiences:

- Any position in which you had contact with customer can be used to show your people skills.
- Any position in which you were responsible for high-volume office work, no matter how boring (data entry, filing, etc.), can be used to show that you understand the importance of attention to detail.
- Any position in which you were responsible for the work of others, can be used to show your ability to work well with others, delegate tasks, and take responsibility for the end product of team work.

Having a few specific and conversation-inducing hobbies or interests on your resume can also help to spark conversation in this type of interview.

**CONS:** Especially in 20-minute screening interviews, going through your whole resume may leave little time to ask questions about the firm or develop a rapport with the interviewer. Make sure that you have a few questions prepared that will logically flow from your answers about your resume and will let you turn the interview into a conversation, rather than a one-sided Q&A session. For example, after talking about the entry on your resume from your time as an extern for a bankruptcy judge, conclude your answer with - "Firm X's strong bankruptcy practice is one of the reasons I'm so excited about the firm, do summer associates often have the chance to do assignments for the bankruptcy group?" - to break up the "resume review" by giving the interviewer the chance to talk about the firm.

**SUMMARY:** Prepare answers to questions on every entry on your resume - be prepared to discuss every item on your resume in depth - as well as several questions that will turn the interviewer's attention away from your resume and demonstrate your interest in the firm.

## **THE "WHAT CAN I TELL YOU ABOUT THE FIRM?" INTERVIEWER**

The "what can I tell you about the firm?" interviewer begins the interview with "**What can I tell you about the firm?**" and just continues to ask "**What else can I tell you about the firm?**" after every answer. This usually indicates that the interviewer is too unprepared to come up with questions, or that s/he believes that letting ask the questions will reveal how serious you are about their firm. In either case, you'll need to be prepared to run the interview when you encounter this type of interviewer.

**PROS:** If you are prepared for this type of interview, it gives you the opportunity to show your interest in the firm through the questions you ask. How to prepare? Make sure that you have researched the firm thoroughly - by reviewing their NALP form on [www.nalpdirectory.com](http://www.nalpdirectory.com), by reviewing the firm's website to see what public image they are trying to create, by talking with upperclassmen and alums who have worked at the firm, by running Google searches on the firm, by reading legal periodicals for stories about the firm, etc. Then formulate questions based on your research, like:

- I noticed in an article in Crain's Chicago Business that you recently defeated class certification in a huge case against your client, MegaCorp X. Does the firm handle a lot of class action defense at that level?
- I had a chance to talk with Susan Student about her summer with your law firm last year. She was very impressed by the collaborative, open-door feel she got from associates and partners alike. How would you describe the firm culture?

You will also want a wealth of more general questions prepared - write out lists rather than just thinking of questions on the spot so that you feel prepared. Another good strategy is to try to engage the interviewer on a more individual level. Ask the interviewer why they joined the firm, what their favorite thing about practicing there is, what their typical case/deal load looks like (for associates) or what types of clients they generally represent (for partners). People love to talk about themselves, so these types of questions may start a good conversation.

**CONS:** The downside of this type of interview is that it keeps the focus on the firm and not on your skills, accomplishments and fit with the firm. Accordingly, you will also want to prepare a few questions that will direct the interviewer to your resume to break up their routine and get them to ask you a few questions. Good examples:

- As you can see from my resume, I spent this summer in the in-house counsel department of Corporation X, where I had the opportunity to do some work on securities issues. Can you tell me a bit about the firm's securities practice?
- As you can see from my resume, I worked for Judge Smarty-Pants this summer. When he learned of my interest in white-collar criminal defense, he recommended that I contact your firm because of your excellent reputation in the area. What percentage of your litigation practice would you say criminal defense accounts for?

And expect follow up questions about working for Corporation X and your interest in securities, or Judge Smarty-Pants and your interest in criminal defense.

**SUMMARY:** Prepare a number of questions about the specific firm; a host of more general questions about the firm's summer associate program, life as an associate, and each interviewer's unique perspective on the firm; and a few questions that will turn the interviewer's attention to the important items on your resume that they may not have noticed or bothered to read.

## **THE AGGRESSIVE INTERVIEWER**

The **aggressive interviewer** is one who takes an aggressive or challenging tone with an interviewee just to see how they respond. The interviewer may point to the weakest grade on your transcript and ask, "**What happened in Torts?**" or will point out that the firm's practice is largely transactional, when all of the experience on your resume is litigation based, and ask, "**Why are you interviewing with us?**" If there are no obvious weaknesses in your resume or transcript for them to pick on, they may ask questions like "**Do you really think that you have what it takes to be a lawyer?**" or "**Do you honestly think that students straight out of law school are worth \$160k a year?**"

The goal of all of these questions is simply to see how you react to aggressive questioning - and reacting calmly and professionally is the only way to go. If you do have a weakness on your resume or transcript, you need to be prepared to discuss it and to show that you've analyzed what happened and taken steps to ensure that it won't happen again -

"Although I loved my Torts class and feel that I learned a lot, I had a terrible exam. I didn't allocate my time well and didn't spend nearly enough time on the question that counted the most. I learned from that experience that I really need to read the entire exam before I begin writing and set time limits for each question. Since then, I've handled exams much more effectively."

For more general aggressive questions, just keep your cool and answer as professionally as possible. Often this type of interviewer is less interested in the substance of your responses than your ability to respond to the questions comfortably.

**PROS:** As unpleasant as an interview with an aggressive interviewer may be, this type of interview can be a great opportunity to explain any weakness you may have as a candidate and to score big points by showing that you can remain upbeat and professional under pressure. Law is a profession where you will often encounter aggressive and challenging opposing counsel, judges, sometimes even clients and co-workers. Showing an interviewer that you can keep your cool demonstrates that you are ready to practice law.

**CONS:** Unprepared students can be so rattled by an aggressive interviewer, or even just an aggressive question or two, that they can't recover, even if the interviewer moves on to more neutral territory later in the interview. Make sure that you are prepared to address any weaknesses in your candidacy - lack of experience in the specific practice area, poor grades, etc. - calmly and professionally. Practice these answers out loud to yourself, with trusted friends, and/or in a mock interview with a Career Services counselor. Knowing that you have answers ready for any question that comes your way can help you enter this type of interview confidently. Also remind yourself while you are in this type of interview that the "attack" is not personal. If an interviewer takes an aggressive tone with you, they probably approach all interviews that way. You may leave feeling like the interviewer didn't like you, but the interviewer may leave feeling like you handled their questions better than anyone else they saw that day.

**SUMMARY:** Prepare concise and positive response to explain any weakness in your candidacy.

## **THE CHATTY INTERVIEWER**

The **chatty interviewer** doesn't ask you hard hitting questions, discuss your resume in detail, or tell you all that much about the firm. Instead, the chatty interviewer will begin the interview by letting you know that you went to the same university and will ask you about favorite professors, hangouts, campus events, etc.; or s/he will open with a remark about last night's Bears game which will launch you into a 20 minute discussion about sports that will take up the entire interview.

**PROS:** This kind of interview can be the most enjoyable for the interviewee. Rather than feeling interviewed, you feel like you are making a new friend. Often, this type of interview means that you are totally acceptable to the firm on paper - your grades, background, and experience are exactly what the firm is looking for - and the interviewer is just trying to get a feel for you as a person. If you find yourself in this type of interview, relax and enjoy yourself, but do note the "cons" section below.

**CONS:** You don't get to highlight your strengths as a candidate or show your specific interest in the firm if you spend the whole interview chatting. And while the chatting probably means that they don't have any serious questions about your qualifications, you want to guard against the interviewer who isn't really doing their job - they may be prepared to recommend that you be extended an offer based on their reading of your resume and the great rapport you had in the interview, but the hiring committee may have tougher questions about you that your interviewer won't be able to respond to if you spent the whole interview just chatting.

It is your job to arm the interviewer with the backup that they need to make a case for hiring you. Make sure that you communicate a few essential pieces of information about yourself in every interview that you have - why you are specifically interested in that firm and why your background and experience makes you a good fit. Identify your absolute "must make" points - one or two highlights from your background and experience that you need to make sure they are aware of (e.g. you are interested in their tax practice because you are a CPA and worked in the field for five years before going to law school) and one or two reasons that you are specifically interested in the firm (e.g. the firm's small size or the recommendation by the judge you worked for who knows you well and thinks you would be a great fit for the firm). Segue from your more social conversation into interview-type conversation gently -

"It's so great to know that I'd be working with a fellow University X alum if I got an offer to be a summer associate at Firm Y. Do you know how big the summer class will be this year? 5 summer associates? That's great - one of the reasons I'm interested in Firm Y is its small size."

"Are there other Packers fans in the firm? Or will I be surrounded by Bears fans in the tax department? I'm getting my certificate in tax at Loyola, and one of the main reasons I'm interested in Firm Y is the strong tax practice."

**SUMMARY:** Identify your absolute "must make" points - the highlights from your background that will be most impressive to that particular firm and the two main reasons that you think the firm is perfect for you - and think of comfortable ways to work them into the chatty interview.