

The importance of fit

Being comfortable with yourself is an important part of finding the best place to launch your legal career.

If you thought trying to fit in was tough in high school, wait until you apply for a job in the legal profession. Recruitment officers in and out of big firms look for candidates who will fit in with the culture of their organization. They expect you to be smart, funny, personable, flexible, and above all, likeable. In short, they want students they can meld into their own corporate mould. So, how do you know if you're the perfect fit?

Chris Skelton can tell you. He can generally spot a good fit within the first two weeks of someone starting at his law firm. He is a partner

and chairman of the recruiting committee at Bennett Jones LLP in Calgary and he's been recruiting people for the past five years. He hires between 16 and 18 students a year and is under more pressure than most to find the best candidates: his firm was recently voted the fourth-best employer in Canada — that's all companies, not just law firms. His success is based on your success, so who you are, and how others see you, matter when it comes to finding a job.

"This is a service industry and we need people who know what it takes to be a good lawyer," says Skelton. "We want to see good grades and a

Chris Skelton on *impressing a large firm*

Get good marks and have an interesting background.

Don't be afraid to take on jobs that are unrelated to law. We like to see firefighters, truck drivers, etc.

Come to the interview with stories to tell. We will not quit you on the law. We want to know about you, if we enjoy your company, it is very positive for you.

Students fret too much about what is being said about them. The partners talk about them less than they think they do. They are not being constantly evaluated and assessed, even though they think they are.

well-rounded, experienced, travelled individual." That is what it means to be a good fit. You want to be someone everybody likes, including students, lawyers, and especially clients. But don't be mistaken, your charm, sharp wit, and often-stamped passport are not enough to get you noticed. You still need the grades. "We want people with horsepower and marks are still the best way to gauge that. Any firm that says it does not consider marks is lying," says Skelton.

Panagiota (Betty) Koutsogiannis, a partner at the intellectual property boutique Robic LLP in Montreal, says fit is the most important factor for her firm. "We are a medium-sized firm of 45 professionals, so there is a lot of interaction between the lawyers and the students. Chemistry counts," she says.

If "fit" means being someone personable, do different firms look for different kinds of fit? "That is difficult to answer," says Skelton. "I'm guessing that if I went across the street to one of the other big firms, I would look for exactly the same type of people that I look for here." But if companies all look for the same fit, how does this

address the needs of clients who are increasingly different in age, race, religion, and culture than the cookie-cutter lawyer? "We don't want everyone to fit the same mould. We don't all wear grey flannel suits and look and talk exactly the same," says Skelton. "We certainly recognize that there are many people out there who are going to be very good lawyers; those who will expand this firm into new areas because they have varied backgrounds."

Philippe Alma, counsel for the federal Department of Justice in Toronto, disagrees with the idea that there is one fit for all. Hired in 2008, Alma believes there are multiple definitions of fit. "For me, every law office has its own culture. This is determined by the kind of law it practises, civil versus criminal for example, but also the size of the firm and its location. Is it in a rural community or in downtown Toronto? You have to ask yourself in which community will you be most comfortable. That is fit," Koutsogiannis agrees. "What works for us at Robic may not work for other firms."

Skelton says there is no magic to being a good fit. "Some people come into the firm from day one and they are comfortable, confident, and capable. For them, being here is a natural fit. For others, they have to learn the ropes." And yet some people never learn. His office has a rehire rate of 90 per cent. The few who are not taken on tend to have certain things in common. A couple of students felt they had to make others look bad in order for them to look good, he says. This is definitely the wrong approach. Firms look for people they can trust and if you are always putting someone else down, you are not the right fit.

Alma knew he had the DOJ fit even before he applied. "The Toronto office is all litigation, so that was one criteria down. I also knew that we would have our own files, which ticked off fit-box No. 2. Some of the cases for young lawyers are of low complexity so you get to learn on your own. And most importantly, I knew DOJ had a commitment to public service and to the public at large which is exactly what I wanted." The DOJ's Toronto office trains roughly

16 articling students per year and hires 100 per cent of them.

Alma says places like the DOJ look for leaders in their community, people who are not interested in law for the business aspect of it, but for how it fits into society. "There is more to working in law than money and a good gym membership. We work on cases that impact society. We have worked on same-sex marriage cases and class-action suits dealing with Agent Orange and mad cow."

According to Skelton, one of the biggest mistakes people make in the interview process is feeling they have to be impressive in a way that does not come naturally to them. "They make an extraordinary effort to mask their real personalities because they want to be someone they are not. In reality, lawyers like to work with students

Betty Koutsogiannis on

making it at a medium-sized shop

Excellent language skills are essential for students applying to Quebec firms.

Plus, we look for humility, flexibility, motivation, and confidence.

Don't overdo your cover letter. It can come across as arrogant.

Find a way to demonstrate your dedication. We look for people who are willing to work very hard.

who are comfortable with themselves, those with confidence and humility." He adds that another huge mistake people make is being dishonest. If there is something you would rather hide, like a poor grade, be entirely honest about it because "the person on the other side of the table probably knows what happened."

Philippe Alma on the ins for government work

Don't rely on on-campus recruitment. Cast a wide net for your law jobs.

If you choose a big firm, don't think it is a job for life. Lots of lawyers get laid off. Be prepared.

Keep all your options open by broadening your interests. Many areas of law are interconnected in ways you don't yet know.

Know that the interview process is different for the Department of Justice than it is for law firms. You will be asked questions about law and you may be asked to prepare a lengthy presentation. Then the interviewers will want to see if you are a good social fit.

Know your stuff.

Fit is something that goes both ways. You may be great for the firm but is it great for you? According to Skelton, the way most students judge their work experiences is by comparing them to the experiences of their

for an interview at a large firm, Skelton has this unexpected response: "People tend not to put the less impressive jobs on their resumé; the manual labour, pumping gas, waiting tables jobs because they think they reflect poorly on

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— Chris Skelton, Bennett Jones LLP

friends. The downside to listening to people you know, is that "rumours definitely get out of control." Interestingly, roughly half the partners at the Bennett Jones Calgary office articulated at the firm and have therefore never worked anywhere else. This means they have no basis for comparison. Skelton jokes that they still don't know if the firm is a good fit for them?

Asked how students can best prepare

them, I believe it is the exact opposite. I look for people with that experience because those posts are challenging, more so than the jobs that look impressive on paper." Adds Koutsogiannis, "Don't make mistakes on your application. I have received letters with the names of other law firms written on them. And although my name is difficult to spell, it is not tough to copy. Take the time to proofread all your submissions." ■



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