## I. INTRODUCTION

## II. SMALL-FIRM CHARACTERISTICS

WHAT IS A SMALL FIRM?
SMALL FIRMS COME IN MANY FLAVORS
TRAINING AND WORK
CLIENT CONTACT AND DEVELOPMENT

## III. CHOOSING AND LOCATING SMALL FIRMS

GEOGRAPHIC CONNECTION MATTERS
CONSIDER TYPE OF FIRM AND WORK
LOCATING SMALL LAW FIRMS

## IV. UNDERSTANDING LAW FIRMS’ BUSINESSES MODELS

HOW BUSINESS MODELS AFFECT LAWYER HIRING

## V. HOW DO I GET A JOB WITH A SMALL FIRM?

THREE WAYS TO GENERATE CONTACTS FOR INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS
TALK WITH YOUR INNER CIRCLE
WRITE TO NEW CONNECTIONS
CONDUCTING THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW
FOLLOWING UP AFTER THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

## VI. LANDING THE JOB

RESUMES AND COVER LETTERS
INTERVIEWING
SALARY AND BENEFITS

## VII. LIFE AFTER THE SMALL FIRM

## VIII. CONCLUSION

APPENDICES
A. Letter Requesting Informational Interview
B. Typical Job-Interview Questions
C. Informational Interview Thank-You Letter

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I. Introduction

If you are like most law students, you know fairly little about small firms. You may imagine that small firms are populated by ambulance chasers who weren’t smart enough to get a real job at a big firm. If you think a bit harder, you may go beyond caricature to recall that you’ve read about small-firm lawyers taking on big corporations to stop environmental pollution, unfair insurance practices or illegal discrimination. And, then, you might remember that a small-firm lawyer you once met drafted wills or closed on houses or represented parties in family-law matters. Maybe you don’t know a lot about small firms because there’s a lot to know.

Let’s start with the numbers: the vast majority of lawyers in private practice in America work at small firms. In fact, only 14% of private-firm attorneys in the US work at firms of more than 100 attorneys. This puts things in perspective, especially at a place like Cornell, where it seems the only law firms out there are those with 750 lawyers or more.

Next, small firms come in many flavors. Some represent businesses and draft contracts, while others represent individuals in litigation. Some small-firm lawyers make a lot of money, while others purposefully keep their salaries modest so that they can take on worthy cases with broad social impact. Some small firms specialize in just one area of law, while others represent clients on a wide range of legal issues. Small-firm lawyers can be found in tiny towns and cities of all sizes. They practice every kind of law imaginable, from criminal defense to corporate securities. Many small-firm lawyers started their practices in government, large firms and with non-profits. Others leave small firms to return to these very practice settings.

While these firms are different, they share common characteristics. Every attorney at the firm, from the named partner to the most junior attorney, will work directly with clients to meet their legal needs. Small firms provide new attorneys with individual guidance and early responsibility: the sooner the new lawyer is up and running, the faster s/he can serve the firm’s clients well. Initiative and hard work are both noticed and rewarded. How they hire, when they hire and what they are looking for in candidates is fairly constant across this very diverse set of employers.

II. Small Firm Characteristics

What is a Small Firm?

Whether a firm can be considered “small” is a function of at least three factors: (1) the number of lawyers practicing at the firm, (2) the size of the legal market, and (3) how the firm sees itself in the context of its history. Certainly, a solo practitioner’s practice would be considered a small firm. Beyond that, things get murky. A firm of 10 lawyers in New York City would be considered small by most everyone, but what if that same firm existed in Ithaca, NY? Is it still a small firm, even if it is the largest in town? And, the history and mindset of the firm also determines whether the firm “thinks” like a larger or smaller firm. For instance, a 30-attorney firm which employs lawyers who began their careers with larger firms might see itself differently than a 30-attorney firm which began 25 years earlier as a
practice of five partners. For the purposes of this handbook, small firms are those which are small relative to their legal market or “think” like small firms in terms of their employment of new attorneys.

Small Firms Come in Many Flavors

Small firms tend to fall into three types: “full service,” “boutique,” and “public interest.” At full-service firms, the lawyers practice in a wide array of areas to meet their clients’ diverse needs. At such a firm, a business client might speak to one lawyer about immigration issues, another about defending a lawsuit, and a third about compliance with state regulations. Alternatively, other smaller firms may specialize in one area of law; these are called “boutique” firms. The practice areas in which boutiques may specialize are diverse. Some of the more typical practice areas are intellectual property and employment law, however, boutiques may specialize in any area of law. Public-interest firms seem, at first glance, to be oxymorons – how can a firm, which is a for-profit venture, serve the public? These firms balance these two goals in many ways. Often, a public-interest firm will charge clients billing rates on a sliding scale so that clients most able to pay higher rates subsidize those clients who cannot pay as much. At other firms of this type, lawyers will take on contingency-fee cases – cases in which they will earn a percentage of the final settlement or judgment – to subsidize cases in which there is little financial upside, but great social benefit at stake.

The daily work of small-firm lawyers and the clients they represent varies greatly from firm to firm. Litigators may work on behalf of plaintiffs or defendants. They may litigate cases on behalf of individuals or corporate entities. They may engage in impact litigation, which seeks to change systemic problems, or they may litigate class-action suits, in which a pool of plaintiffs with a shared grievance files a suit as a whole. Pre-trial, trial, and appellate advocacy, in state and federal courts, are all found in small firms. Transactional work is also prevalent. Small-firm lawyers may negotiate contracts, draft wills and trusts, and provide tax advising. They may also advise on corporate formation and securities offerings. Some small-firm lawyers counsel clients regarding compliance with municipal, state, and federal regulatory schemes as well as international law. Advising on risk management, e-security, and personnel practices allow small-firm lawyers to help their clients protect their businesses.

Training and Work

While small firms are diverse in many ways, especially for new attorneys, they share important characteristics. First, new lawyers can expect substantive work, early on in their careers. This substantive work is paired with supervision from more senior attorneys. The logic is straightforward: when a small firm hires a law student or recent graduate, it does so because there is legal work to do. The sooner the new lawyer is able to do this work independently and effectively, the sooner the firm can serve its clients’ needs (and get paid, of course). Senior lawyers do not shield new lawyers from substantive work; rather, they provide them with meaningful assignments and enough supervision to ensure that the junior lawyer will complete the assignment to the client’s satisfaction.
Next, smaller firm practices reward initiative and quick learning. Junior lawyers who seek out new opportunities and are able to reliably produce good work product will find themselves handling their own matters early in their careers. And, beyond more responsibility, these junior lawyers may move more quickly toward partnership if senior attorneys see their long-term value to the firm. Also, senior attorneys who determine pay and bonuses often show their appreciation monetarily.

Most small firms’ styles can be described as informal. Not all small-firm lawyers wear jeans or bring their dogs to work, but overall, the more intimate atmosphere of a smaller firm lends itself to a more relaxed workplace. Work-life balance may be important to some small firms. So, while it may not be possible early in a junior attorney’s career, a mid-level or senior-level attorney at a small firm may be able to telecommute or work non-standard hours.

Finally, at many smaller firms, new attorneys will have the opportunity to specialize in one or two areas of law early in their careers. Especially where there is client demand and few senior attorneys with expertise, a young attorney can become the “resident expert” on emerging areas of law or practice specializations in which the firm had little previous experience.

**Client Contact and Development**

At smaller firms, all attorneys meet with clients, assess their needs and communicate their legal conclusions, orally or in writing, directly to clients. Early on in the new lawyer’s career, the senior lawyer may serve as the point of contact with the client, thus serving as a filter between the junior lawyer and client. However, over time, the senior lawyer will likely hand over primary client communication responsibilities to the newer attorney so that the senior lawyer can free his/herself to work on other more complex matters, develop new client relationships, and manage the business of the firm.

As his/her career progresses, the junior lawyer will also learn about client development. Law students may fear that they will be asked to “eat what they kill” from day one, but this is almost never the case. Rather, a new attorney will begin his/her career working for matters of existing firm clients. Maintaining and strengthening ties to current clients is a very important form of client development, in and of itself. Then, after the junior lawyer has demonstrated solid legal and client-relations skills, more senior lawyers will mentor the junior lawyer in client development. Client development can take many forms: in some cases, new clients may learn of the attorney’s work by reputation, in other cases new business will stem from personal or community relationships that the new attorney developed before joining the firm or cultivates through new activities.
III. Choosing and Locating Small Firms

Geographic Connection Matters

For several reasons, smaller firms prefer to hire new attorneys with geographic ties to their area. First, new lawyers who have some connection to the area are more likely to stay there in the long term. So, the firm will be able to recoup its training investment in the new attorney. Next, pre-existing relationships may make client development easier for the new attorney. Also, familiarity with local customs, economics, and style can help the junior lawyer “fit in” to the legal community more quickly. Making connections among lawyers in a city or town can benefit the firm: the new attorney may gain insights and referrals from other practitioners.

While geographic ties matter, new attorneys need not confine themselves to the area in which they grew up. Other good geographic areas may include those where extended family live, the city or state in which the new attorney attended college or law school, or a place to which the new attorney’s significant other has ties. And, finally, while establishing a connection may be a bit more challenging, focusing on an area that you simply love can be an option too.

Irrespective of the degree of your affiliation with a location, it is essential to gather as much information as possible on the economy, issues of concern, politics, legal landscape, and general culture of the city or town. Thanks to the internet, this has become quite easy. Read on-line publications, including the local and regional newspaper, publications of the local bar association, and business journals written in the area. Talk to friends and family who live nearby. Watch the local news, if possible. Then, get up and get yourself there! Nothing can substitute for visiting your area of choice. By visiting the local grocery story, café or watering hole, you can learn what is important to this community, and by extension, the legal issues that may be prevalent. And, when contacting employers, you can show your dedication to the community by demonstrating your insider knowledge.

Consider Type of Firm and Work

After assessing your geographic target, consider the type of work and type of firm that would be most appealing to you. Start by contemplating your interests and preferences. Think about the type of substantive law you’ve enjoyed in law school. Examine the pros and cons of your legal and non-legal work experiences to date. Consider taking the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), administered by Karen Comstock or Elizabeth Peck, which can help you figure out your preferred working style and atmosphere. (For a MBTI appointment, email Molly Brewton at mb105@cornell.edu) Talk to practitioners about their work to learn more about the reality of practice areas you are considering. Read practitioners’ reflections in The Official Guide to Legal Specialties and Choosing Small, Choosing Smart: both books can be borrowed from the Office of Public Service if you don’t have a copy.

In addition to considering your own preferences, it is essential that you determine the needs of your target community. In addition to reading about the locality, talk to lawyers who already practice there. And, use your common sense: if you really
want to live in Kansas, you won’t find much demand for admiralty law there! However, don’t make assumptions about the sophistication of a particular location’s legal community. Even in the smallest of towns, you may find diverse and complex legal issues and practice areas.

Finally, as you contemplate a small-firm job search, think about how you can prepare yourself in law school to be an asset to a firm from the very start. As mentioned above, small firms seek and reward law students and new lawyers who can engage in the practice of law early in their careers. During law school choose courses through which you can gain substantive knowledge useful to small firms. Enroll in clinical programs to gain practical skills pertaining to client interaction, factual investigation, negotiation with government entities, oral advocacy, case strategy, discovery practice, and the like. Part-time work for a local Ithaca firm during the term can also help law students understand the business of law and the realities that small-firm lawyers face.

Locating Small Law Firms

There are many resources you can use to identify and research small firms. One of the most effective is Martindale Hubbell, which is like a specialized Yellow Pages for lawyers. Conduct basic searching at www.martindale.com. For more advanced searches, access Martindale Hubbell via LexisNexis: http://www.lexisnexis.com/lawschool/login.aspx (username and password required). You can search firms by practice area, firm size and location. And, you can also find individuals who graduated from Cornell Law School or your undergraduate institution.

Bar associations maintain directories of their members. A quick internet search should turn up a bar association in your preferred locality. The association’s website may list its members. Or, you may need to join the association to access the roster. Most bar association dues are very low for students or recent graduates, so becoming a member of a bar association need not be an expensive proposition.

National bar associations, like the American Bar Association, often organize themselves into divisions by practice area or practice setting. Many ABA divisions are relevant to small firms, most notably the General Practice, Solo & Small Firm Division: http://www.americanbar.org/groups/gpsolo.html

Specialized bar associations can also be of use in finding small firms. For instance, the American Trial Lawyers Association is composed of trial lawyers who litigate on behalf of plaintiffs or criminal defendants. Nearly all ATLA members work at small firms and the ATLA website (http://www.theatla.com/) provides profiles and contact information for these lawyers. Also, the National Lawyers Guild (http://www.nlg.org/), the oldest and largest public interest/human rights bar in the US, includes many small-firm lawyers whose practices are dedicated progressive issues. See Karen Comstock for a copy of the National Lawyers Guild Referral Directory, which contains contact information for NLG small-firm lawyers nationwide. Finally, affinity bars can also provide connections to small-firm lawyers. At the
national and city levels, there are bar associations serving the needs of women lawyers, lawyers of color, GLBT lawyers and many others.

Once you have identified small firms, you should see if you can find more information about them. Naturally, you will read their websites. In addition, you should do some searching on the LexisNexis News Database (http://www.lexisnexis.com/lawschool/login.aspx - username and password required) to find news stories in which they are mentioned or cases in which they have appeared.

IV. Understanding Law Firms’ Businesses Models

Now that you have determined that small firms may be right for you, you know the geographic area you are targeting, have some sense for the kind of practice you would like to explore, and have identified firms of interest to you, there is one final step before you embark on your small-firm job search. You need to understand how small firms make money. Unless you understand small firms’ business models, you cannot understand how to get a job with them.

Many people assume that small firms are just like big firms, only smaller. In fact, small firms and large firms work on different business models. In other words, small firms are NOT large firms in miniature.

Larger firms have large corporate clients which produce a somewhat predictable stream of work for the firm’s lawyers. For example, if your firm represents Boeing and does the legal work for all the airplanes it sells, given how big Boeing is and how many planes it sells, a large firm will see a constant stream of work each year. In addition, large firms have historically billed their clients on an hourly basis for the work they do. While this is changing as some corporate clients are demanding “fee-based” billing – that is, a price tag based on the job to be done, irrespective of the hours it take to complete the work – the billable hour remains the predominant fee-collection method among larger firms. So, larger firms have some sense of how many lawyers they will need to do the work and how much money they will earn each year.

Small firms don’t work this way because, generally, smaller firms’ clients are smaller. Smaller corporate clients may need legal work more sporadically than their larger counterparts. And, many small firms represent individuals who may not bring any repeat business to the firm. So, typically, a small firm serves a large group of smaller clients: the overall stream of work remains fairly stable, but the stream of work from any one client isn’t that constant or predictable. In addition, the way that small firms get paid varies. Some smaller firms bill their clients on an hourly basis or do “assigned counsel” cases in which the state assigns the case to the lawyer and the state pays the hourly fee. Other cases are taken on a contingency fee: the fee is “contingent” on a favorable outcome for the client. With these arrangements, the firm and client agree at the outset of the representation that the lawyer will recover a percentage, usually between 25% and 33%, of any award or settlement. In some areas of practice, the lawyers’ fees are set by statute, and the fees are paid at the end of the case. And, some smaller firms enter into fee-based billing arrangements.
with clients, so that they are paid a flat fee for a completion of a task, without taking the number of billable hours into account. Due to the nature of smaller firms’ clients and the array of payment arrangements, smaller firms have less ability to predict how many lawyers they will need to represent their clients and how much money they will make in a given year.

How Business Models Affect Lawyer Hiring

Due to the nature of their business, larger firms have some ability to predict how many lawyers they will need to meet their clients’ needs annually. In addition, larger firms have historically seen some predictability in the number of associates who leave the firm each year. While in the past these associate departures were voluntary, rather than imposed by the firms as they have been in the recent past, the fact remains that larger firms are able, at some level, to predict just how many associates they will have to assist the partners in their practices. So, by understanding, roughly, how much work clients will need done and how many associates the firm will have to do that work, these larger firms are able to predict how many new lawyers they will need every year.

Because larger firms have some ability to predict their entry-level attorney hiring needs well in advance, they run summer associate programs for 2L students. Summer associate programs are essentially three-month long interviews to see if the students should receive offers of permanent employment. When a large firm hires a 2L student in September of his/her second year for a summer associate position, the firm is really making that hiring decision based on its predicted hiring needs TWO YEARS away, after the student has graduated from law school.

Larger firms which hire routinely have recruiting staffs and hiring committees comprised of partners and associates to run their summer programs and facilitate entry-level attorney hiring. They hire in a predictable way, on predictable timelines. Many of these larger firms participate in on-campus recruiting or off-campus job fair programs. Their hiring timeline is fairly rigid and hiring decisions are made in a timely way. Because in some cases many thousands of law students will be seeking positions with these larger firms and because prestige is very important to these employers, these larger firms place a premium on verifiable credentials like the quality of the law school the applicant attends and his/her achievements there.

Small firms, however, behave more like the rest of the employers in the economy: they hire when (1) someone quits, or (2) they have more work to do than people to do it. This is due, in part, to the fact that small firms cannot easily predict their clients’ demands or stream of earnings very far in advance. Also, associates don’t leave small firms very often or at least not at a predictable rate. Together, this means that small firms do not hire more than a few months in advance of the new lawyer’s potential start date. Should a smaller firm hire a law student for the summer or a recent graduate for an entry-level position, they will do so only if they have enough work to keep that person busy. And, there may be a weak connection between summer work and permanent employment: most small firms cannot tell a student at the end of the 2L summer that there will be a job waiting for him/her
after graduation. Even if they REALLY like the student and would like that student to return to the firm as a new associate, most smaller firms won’t be able to make post-graduate employment offers until closer to the time at which the graduate would begin working.

Smaller firms don’t run summer associate programs at all. They do not maintain recruiting staffs or hiring committees. Office managers or secretaries receive unsolicited “mass mailing” applications and put them in a file if the firm isn’t actively hiring when those application materials come in. While they will care about your academic credentials, they are also concerned that you have strong ties to their area, are interested in the work that they do, have relevant skills and knowledge, and will fit in with their culture. And, they don’t engage in formal hiring programs like job fairs. As for timing, they typically hire new lawyers or summer externs a few months in advance of the start of work. Sometimes they hire through classified advertising, but this is typically the case for lateral candidates, not entry-level lawyers. Small firms often hire people they know or who come along just at the right time.

V. How Do I Get a Job With a Small Firm?

Wait a minute! If small firms don’t run summer associate programs, don’t run many classifieds for new attorneys or students, and they don’t do much with unsolicited application materials, how does anyone ever get a job with a small firm? How do I get to know lawyers at small firms or time my application so that it comes along right when the firm is hiring?

The answer: Informational Interviewing. What is informational interviewing? It is the process of actively reaching out to individuals who can ultimately lead you to a job. Starting with people you know or people who share something in common with you, you speak to individuals and ask them for three things: Advice, Information, and Referrals. [Remember this by spelling the word AIR.] Remember everyone has air, even if they don’t have a job for you at this very moment.

Informational interviewing is different than interviewing for a job. In this case, the job seeker - that’s you - requests the meeting. You are in charge of the conversation and have questions ready to ask. You set the agenda so that you get the AIR (Advice, Information, and Referrals) you need. You explore career options and discover opportunities that are not publicly advertised. And, you demonstrate, by how well you run the meeting, that you are just the kind of person this small firm might want to hire someday.

Informational interviewing has many benefits. First, by conducting informational interviews you will get to know lawyers at small firms so they will think of you later when they, or their colleagues at other firms, have openings. And, every time you get a referral you open the door to other possibilities at other small firms. Plus, along the way you will gain more and more knowledge about the small firm market in your target community. Did you know that 75-90% of all jobs in the US economy are never advertised? The ONLY way to find out about those hidden jobs is to talk to people via informational interviews.
Three Ways to Generate Contacts for Informational Interviews

There are three ways pathways to contact development: Informal, Web-Based and Formal.

It is easy to develop contacts informally: simply ask everyone you know whether they know any lawyers. Begin with family members, friends at Cornell, friends from college, friends from your hometown, law professors, undergraduate professors, previous work contacts, and recreational contacts. Don’t forget service contacts (your doctor, insurance agent etc.), as well as contacts via professional affiliations, religious affiliations, and volunteer organizations and activities. Don’t prejudge or exclude people from your list of initial contacts. Write down everyone you can think of and fine tune your list later.

The internet increasingly helps people connect with one another, personally and professionally. For example, use LinkedIn (http://www.linkedin.com/) to expand your professional network and to conduct background research on people and organizations. Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/), when used professionally, can help you tap into new groups of contacts and communicate with your existing network of friends to generate more connections. Via Twitter (http://twitter.com/), you can join groups to find like-minded people and read twitter feeds on particular areas of law which may lead you to further contacts.

Finally, there are slightly more formal ways to develop contacts. First, consider alumni of Cornell Law School. Via the Symplicity system (https://law-cornell-csm.symplicity.com/index.php?cck=1&au=&ck=), you can access a network of over 500 alumni who have volunteered to serve as mentors to current students. (In addition, most undergraduate institutions maintain a similar system, so contact your undergraduate career services office to learn more.) To find those Cornell Law graduates who haven’t yet registered as Symplicity mentors, conduct a search via the LexisNexis Lawyer Locator (http://www.lexisnexis.com/lawschool/login.aspx - username and password required). The Locator searches Martindale-Hubbell, the largest database of US lawyers in the world; you can tailor your search to find Cornell grads at small firms in any given location. Cornell Law School graduates, but not CLS students, can also search the law school alumni directory maintained by the Alumni Affairs Office. Contact Molly Brewton (mb105@cornell.edu) for a username and password.

To broaden beyond alumni contacts, read legal newspapers, bar association publications, magazines, and relevant web sites to reap two different types of contacts. First, when an attorney’s work is highlighted in an article, you can contact that person and talk to them about the work that was featured. Also, you can reach out to the author of the piece. Especially in bar publications, the writers are volunteers who actually practice law for a living. You can contact the author, letting him/her know that you liked the article and wanted to learn more.
Talk With Your Inner Circle

Start by talking to family, friends, faculty or anyone else you feel comfortable with. All you have to do is tell them what you are looking for: E.g., “I’m interested in working for a small firm in Connecticut and would like to learn more about what it’s really like. Do you know anyone working in Connecticut? In a small firm? Who might have some advice for me?”

If the answer is “Yes,” ask if they can call and introduce you, or if you can use their name when you make more formal contact. (The best way to “drop a name” is to start your letter as follows: “So and so recommended that I contact you.”)

If the answer is “No,” ask them to please let you know if they do think of a referral. And, don’t hesitate to take the conversation further by asking more questions like those listed on the next page.

Write To New Connections

When making contact with someone you don’t already know, you may feel most comfortable requesting an informational interview in writing. This gives the contact person a point of reference for your later phone call/meeting and will help you to be perceived as businesslike and professional. You can send your letter via regular mail or via email. If you contact people by email, maintain the same high standards of grammar and punctuation as you would in any business correspondence.

Your letter should indicate who you are, how you got the contact’s name, and that you are seeking Advice and Information (you save the request for Referrals for the meeting itself). Let the contact know that you would like to meet for a few minutes in person, if possible. Indicate that you are flexible as to the time, date, and location of the informational interview. State when you will be (or could be) in his/her area in the near future. And, offer to talk by phone, rather than at an in-person meeting, if more convenient to the contact. To help you get started, review a sample letter requesting an informational interview at Appendix A.

Should you send a resume along with the letter? Here we have a split of authority. On the one hand, since you are asking for information and not a job, including a resume may send a mixed signal as resumes are typically only used in job applications. On the other hand, if you don’t include a resume, you have less opportunity to get the contact interested in talking to you. So, if you decide to include a resume, be sure to include some language in your letter which says something like, “To give you a bit more information about my background before our meeting, I’ve attached my resume.” If you do not send a resume, you should write a slightly longer letter which includes a little more information about you.

When a contact agrees to meet with you, be ready to handle logistics. You would usually benefit from a meeting at his/her office where information for additional contacts is readily available. When setting up the appointment, bear in mind that you are asking busy people to give up time to talk to you; their convenience, not yours, should be paramount. So, be as flexible as you reasonably can be as to
time/date/location of the meeting. Also, be prepared for interruptions and last-minute rescheduling, as lawyers are often called to manage client emergencies without much notice. Remain calm and pleasant no matter what happens.

Conducting the Informational Interview

If you are meeting in person, dress as you would for a traditional job interview. Be prompt. Observe as well as listen.

Be prepared with open ended questions such as:

- What are some of the particular advantages and disadvantages of this kind of practice?
- Could you tell me what a “typical” day is like for you?
- What do you like about your work?
- Are there things you dislike about your work?
- What courses might I select to prepare myself to do work similar to yours?
- Are there particular skills or personality traits that you think are needed in your kind of practice that might be different from other kinds of lawyering?
- What’s the future outlook for ______? (e.g., small firms, environmental law, this city - whatever is appropriate).
- What would you see as the best way to get the skills and experience to best qualify me for working at a firm like this and/or in this area of practice?
- What do you suggest as the best way for someone with my experience to approach prospective employers?
- How should someone with my lack of experience approach prospective employers?
- How did you go about finding this job?
- What would you estimate small firms pay summer clerks/new graduates?
- Would you suggest any ways in which I could improve the content or appearance of my resume?
- Do you think there are things on my resume that prospective employers might object to?
- Can you think of anyone else that I should talk to? Would you mind if I used your name when I contact him/her?

You are in the “driver's seat” in this interview, so you need to keep the conversation going and be ready with the next question. It is appropriate in this context to take notes, but don’t let your note taking break the flow of the conversation: capturing every detail is not as important as connecting with the lawyer in front of you. As the interview proceeds, you may find that you need to re-focus the discussion if your contact takes off on a tangent. However, if you cannot gently redirect the contact back to your agenda, don’t force it. Again, creating a positive interaction is more important than making sure that your every question is answered.

Also, if this meeting becomes a job interview, you may have to switch gears and field more traditional interview questions. So, make sure to bring a copy of your resume, if you didn’t send it initially, and practice answering typical job interview questions before the meeting. See Appendix B for typical job interview questions.
Don’t be afraid to arrange for another interview if necessary to continue with the job interview.

Following up after the Informational Interview

Immediately after you leave the meeting, be sure to make notes of your conversation. This will help you write your thank you letter and will give you topics to refer to when you speak again. Then, be sure to send a thank you letter as promptly as possible. You may send it via email or postal mail. See a sample informational interview thank you letter at Appendix C for ideas. Then, in the coming months, keep in touch with your contact through quick notes or emails to let them know of new achievements or your job search progress. After working so hard to build your network, you need to give it a little attention every once in a while to ensure that it remains healthy.

VI. Landing The Job

Resumes and Cover Letters

Through the informational interview process you will learn of job openings to which you should formally apply. When you draft your cover letter and resume, avoid the temptation to use old application materials that you wrote for other employers in the past. While your resume may need only re-organization or a change of emphasis, it is essential that you tailor your cover letter to this specific employer and opportunity.

Research: Before you sit down to write, do as much research as you can on this employer. Begin by carefully reviewing its website. Then, do external research via LexisNexis’s News database (http://www.lexisnexis.com/lawschool/login.aspx - username and password required) to read any press coverage of the firm. Think about what the firm’s lawyers do: who are the firm’s clients, what are its primary areas of specialization, what is the firm known for? Also, try to learn from the firm what role it sees for you: will you be assigned to work with a specific attorney(s), are there areas of law on which you will focus, are you going to be assigned to one particular matter or client?

Match Skills to Needs: Once you have done this research, think about firm’s needs. Will there be a lot of pre-trial motion drafting? Witness interviewing? Contract negotiation and drafting? Managing of voluminous documents? Then, consider the skills and knowledge you possess which will help you meet the firm’s needs. Have you ever done work which is similar to the work that the firm will need you to do? Identify specific experiences – paid work, clinical work, externships, course work - which you can use to illustrate that you possess concrete skills and substantive knowledge that will be directly relevant to the firm.

Review your resume to be sure that these specific experiences are highlighted. It is perfectly appropriate to change the emphasis of your resume entries to meet different firms’ needs. For example, you might highlight one group of relevant courses for one firm and another set of courses for another. Or, you might re-draft
an experience description to place more emphasis on certain skills or areas of law, depending on the firm’s needs.

When you write your cover letter, be sure that you show the firm that you (a) understand its practice, (b) understand what work you will do at the firm, (c) discuss why you want to do this work, and (d) demonstrate that you have the skills to get the work done.

In the first paragraph of the letter, explain who you are and why you are writing. This is the place to discuss issues (a) through (c). In the middle paragraph(s) of the letter you will address issue (d). In these middle paragraphs, start with a topic sentence, highlighting a necessary skill or knowledge set, then use the remainder of the paragraph to cite specific examples of how you acquired those skills or knowledge. Your concluding paragraph should indicate the materials attached to the letter, when you would be available to meet with the firm, and how the firm can contact you. And, be sure to thank the reader for his/her time and consideration.

Interviewing

Once you secure an interview, basic interview rules apply. In addition, there are special considerations to take into account for small firm interviews. First, show your research. Due to their smaller size, hiring is very personal for these types of firms. You need to demonstrate to a small firm that you really want to work for that firm – not just any firm. Take all opportunities to talk about the research you have done about the firm and your understanding of its work and lawyers. Similarly, you should anticipate concerns that the firm may have and be ready to meet them. For example, perhaps you’ve only worked for a large firm or for public-sector employers; be ready to talk about why small firm practice appeals to you. Or, maybe you don’t have knowledge of a particular area of law – talk about how you will acquire that knowledge before you would start the job. And, be prepared to acknowledge economic reality: in a better economy you might not be looking for a job with a small firm. You should practice how you will talk about that reality in a mature way. With rehearsal, you will be able to show the employer that even though this may not have been your initial pathway, it now may be the best one for you. This last point highlights the best advice available on interviewing: do a mock interview with a career counselor before the interview!

Salary and Benefits

At some point, either during the interviewing stage or after the firm has extended you an offer, the topic of money will arise. Typically the firm will ask you, “About how much do you want to earn?” Unfortunately, your answer can’t be, “$500K to start.” So, how do you come up with a number?

First, sit down and figure out how much you need to live. Consider everything: housing, utilities, telephone and internet fees, transportation, parking, food, insurance, etc. If you are a new graduate also factor in loan payments, wardrobe expenses, and other “start-up” costs. Try to be realistic about your needs, but don’t
skimp too much. By underestimating your financial needs you could put yourself in the difficult situation of either having to borrow money from family or friends or ask the firm for more money early in your career.

Next, research and network to find out the typical salary for this type of job in the local legal community. Unfortunately, there is very little public information available re: small firm salaries. The best data available is collected and compiled by NALP. NALP’s findings conclude that, based on salaries reported by new graduates, firms of 2-10 attorneys paid a median starting salary of $50,000 in 2009, and slightly larger firms of 11-25 attorneys paid $65,000 to start. While this is helpful to know, it may not be relevant to all markets or all firms: this is aggregated data collected from new graduates nationwide and reflects the pre-recession economy.

To find out what small firms in your geographic region pay, it is essential that you talk to lawyers in that community. When you are conducting your informational interviews to gain advice, information and referrals, be sure to talk about this with your contacts. Talking about pay issues in an informational interview, rather than a job interview, will help you to benchmark the area before you are asked for your salary expectations in a job-offer context.

For full-time jobs, it is essential that you recognize that salary is only one form of compensation. When negotiating with a small firm about compensation, be sure to think about the dollar value of all potential benefits: health insurance, disability insurance, life insurance, malpractice insurance, bar exam expenses, bar review costs, licensing fees, continuing legal education costs, paid sick leave and vacation leave, transportation and parking cost. Small firms may not cover all of these expenses, however, you need to be aware of all the possible non-salary costs that you will incur and you may want to include some of these topics in your salary discussion.

Finally, keep the big picture in mind. Yes, you have a lot of bills to pay, and you need money to do that. And, you also need a job which will allow you to gain skills and knowledge in an environment which matches your preferences and needs. If you find the right firm for you, be mindful that the compensation you make in the first year may not at all be reflective of your long-term potential. Smaller firms may reward fast-learning new attorneys with bonuses or salary increases early in their careers. And, depending on the way that the firm makes money, work on contingency cases can lead to spikes in fees when cases settle or trials are won. Lastly, keep non-monetary compensation in mind, especially at the beginning of your career: the training you get early on can pay big dividends as your career matures.
VII. Life After the Small Firm

For many students, small firm practice may not be the end game. Some wonder whether taking a position with a small firm, for the summer or immediately after graduation, will close other employment options in the future. In a word: no.

The skills and knowledge that you will gain with a smaller firm is readily transferable to positions in government, with larger firms, with corporations and with the judiciary. For example, small-firm lawyers who become experienced trial litigators may become very attractive to U.S. Attorneys’ Offices and state district attorneys. Large firms may find appealing a small-firm lawyer who has gained experience in a specialized area of law or who has appeared frequently before administrative agencies. Many in-house counsel offices hire new lawyers from the ranks of their outside counsel who work at firms. Small-firm lawyers who work closely with the leadership of their corporate clients learn their clients’ business and legal needs, making them ideal candidates to join the company and serve it from within. And, the judiciary also values the experience that small-firm practice brings - many law clerks and judges, at the state and federal levels, began their careers at smaller firms.

VIII. Conclusion

A handbook like this cannot possibly answer every question or meet the needs of all job seekers. Once you’ve decided that small firm practice is for you, make an appointment (via Molly Brewton at mb105@cornell.edu) with Elizabeth Peck in the Office of Public Service to discuss a small-firm job search strategy tailored to your particular goals and interests.
Dear Ms. Hamilton:

In a recent conversation with __________, s/he suggested I contact you about your practice because of your extensive experience and outstanding reputation in your field. I am a student at Cornell Law School from the Pacific Northwest and am particularly interested in learning more about working in Seattle for a small firm like yours.

I would appreciate any general advice or information you could offer me as I explore small firm opportunities in the Puget Sound area, especially in _______(practice area, if appropriate).

Since I will be in Seattle between ___ and ___ (dates), I would be very grateful for the opportunity to meet with you for 10 to 15 minutes that week. Alternatively, if you are unable to meet with me in person, I hoped you would be willing to correspond with me by phone or email in the near future.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,

Andrew Dickson White

Andrew Dickson White
APPENDIX B: TYPICAL JOB-INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Why are you interviewing with us?
- What have you read about us?
- Why did you go to Law School?
- What are your greatest strengths? Weaknesses?
- Tell me about yourself.
- Why should we hire you?
- Where else are you interviewing?
- How do you work under pressure?
- How do you feel about research? Writing? Client contact?
- What accomplishments in your life have given you most satisfaction?
- Do you have a geographical preference?
- What do you see yourself doing in five years?
- Tell us what you did last summer.
- What courses did you like best?
- What changes would you make in your law school curriculum?
- Are your grades a good indication of your academic achievement?
- What are your outside interests?
- Favorite books/movies/ hobbies?
- Do you have any questions?
[date]

Jane Hamilton, Esq.
Hamilton & Jones, PLLC
One American Avenue
Seattle, WA 98103

Dear Ms. Hamilton:

Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to meet with me last Friday to discuss small firm practice in Seattle. I greatly appreciate your insights about course selection and your review of my resume.

I have already contacted Ms. ________, at your suggestion, and I plan to speak with her next week.

Your help was invaluable, and I will keep you posted on my search.

Sincerely,

Andrew Dickson White

Andrew Dickson White