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How to . . . get headhunted

Fed up and underpaid? Dominique Graham tells us what recruiters are looking for in prospective lateral hires



Interview by Alex Aldridge

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As a headhunter, your job is to talk to lawyers and their clients, all day, every day. That's it. As I'm sure you can imagine, you hear all kinds of things, and after a while you build up a very good picture — often from ten or fifteen different sources — about an individual lawyer.

Technical ability is supposed to be a given these days, but it's amazing how many lawyers fall short. And they're often not the ones you'd expect. The market perception that the top firms possess the best black-letter lawyers can be misleading. Some big name City outfits have, shall we say, wider quality parameters than others, while I regularly come across fantastic people at so-called "mid-market" firms. In short, most good headhunters are well aware that you can find quality — and rubbish — everywhere.

Be neither vertically nor horizontally challenged. By that I mean it's important to be able to keep associates happy and get on with fellow partners. Typically British understatement about someone being "a management headache" or "rather prickly, even to those on the same side" certainly set alarm bells ringing.

That said, kudos among clients is what really counts. You can be as nice as pie, but if you don't have client traction, you're not going to get headhunted. Law firms say they want people with a collegiate mentality and an aversion to hogging work. Actually what they want are people without overtly sharp elbows who are going to be profitable.

An awful lot of "magic circle" lawyers are what I call "service partners". In other words, they've relied on the brand to get them work. As a result, they're not in a great position if they need to move. A couple of years ago when Freshfields cut down on its partnership we got a lot of guys coming in who'd been on £800,000-plus yet had zero client following and no experience of actively going out and bringing in work. Awfully nice people, but incredibly expensive given what they offered. When they said they'd take a couple of hundred grand less, it was like: "Listen, you don't understand. You'll need to take much more of a cut than that, and even then I might not be able to place you."

Get yourself in the directories. Lawyers featured in Chambers or the Legal 500 are able to say with forced modesty, "Oh, it's nothing, it's just nonsense, isn't it?" Then you see whatever blurb that's been written about them splashed all over their marketing material. Let's be honest here: getting ranked in the directories is massively important. Clients use them, lawyers use them, headhunters use them. The

secret to getting featured? Return their calls, complete their questionnaires properly and send them back on time.

Take a journo to lunch. If you're a God-like, Nigel Boardman-type character who handles massive acquisition after massive acquisition, getting your name into the press — and onto headhunters' radar — doesn't require a great deal of effort. However, if you're not quite at that level, you need to try a little harder. I know of plenty of lawyers operating a few rungs lower down the pecking order who have very effectively raised their visibility through building up mutually beneficial relationships with journalists. Trading water cooler gossip for first refusal on quotes does come with its risks though.

Firms steer clear of people with reputations for being loose canons. Self-publicity is fine as long as you're discreet. This is an amazingly small pool, almost a village, and you can be sure that a negative comment about someone will reach their ears before the close of business that same day.

Savvy lawyers cultivate contacts in the recruitment industry. A lot of the partners I deal with are not actively looking to move, just keeping an eye out in case anything really fantastic comes up. Of course, you only know what someone else's idea of "fantastic" is if you really understand their personality and practice. That's why it's advisable for lawyers to develop a professional friendship with someone in the world of legal recruitment. And if your boss finds out? Well, since the American firms moved in to London, having coffee with a headhunter is no longer seen as such a crime. It might even get you a pay rise.

There is one last thing . . . Good looks won't do you any harm. Attractive lawyers are, after all, quite a rare breed — especially in this country. The Europeans definitely have the edge in that department. At the moment we're desperately seeking a litigation mandate in Italy to enable us to headhunt the divine [Claudio LaBruna](#) of LaBruna Mazziotti Segni!

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