
Small Law Firm Search Tips

Office of Career & Professional Development
2016, UC Hastings College of the Law

THE FACTS

In 2014, of the law school grads nationwide who went to work for a firm, 57% went to a firm with fewer than 50 attorneys (about 41% to firms with 1-10 attorneys, 10% to firms with 11-25 attorneys, and 6% to firms with 26-50 attorneys).

What is different about looking for a small firm job?

- Few small firms recruit on campus – they don't find you, **you have to find them**.
- Small firms **hire in limited numbers**.
- Small firms **often hire without posting**.
- While small firms generally **hire later in the year**, there are no set hiring timelines for small firms (like there are for the larger firms). Don't give up: A "no" or no answer usually means the firm doesn't have a need at that particular point in time. Those who start identifying their target firms and trying to make meaningful connections with them earlier will be at an advantage.
- The **trade-offs** in going to smaller firms, which often have more limited financial resources and lower compensation, are generally better work-life balance, lower billable expectations, early responsibility and more collegial environments.
- 3Ls may find that smaller firms predominantly **hire on a temporary basis prior to bar results**; others will hire on a permanent basis conditioned on passing the bar exam and being admitted to practice.
- Small firms may invest less time and money in maintaining promotional materials, including websites, so the small firm job seeker will need to **be creative in finding information** (through Google, Lexis searches, talking with people, joining specialty bar associations, attending small firm related events, etc.).

Finding small firms to approach for employment:

- **Don't wait** for the firms to advertise; start a list of small firms in your geographic area of interest.
- Here are some ways to **start your list**:
 1. In the Document Library on HastingsCareersOnline.com (HCO) check out the CA small and mid-sized firm cheat sheet (NB: this list is not exhaustive!) First, investigate if the firm did an OCI this year. If so, that will tell you whether they have certain grade standards and also whether they may have already filled their hiring needs.
 2. Look to **see which firms are advertising for jobs** - including alumni jobs - on HCO. Do remember, however, that most small firms don't post! Even if the advertised job is not appropriate, look up the firm online to see if they interest you and should be added to your target list.

3. If you are trying to figure out what practice areas to target, try some **informational interviews** with alumni or lawyer alumni from your undergraduate institution. *The Alumni Mentor program is a great way to get started!*
 4. If you know the practice area you are interested in, a good way to start your target firm list is to search Martindale-Hubbell (www.martindale.com; more detailed searching is available on Martindale through Lexis). You can **search for law firms by location, firm size and practice area**—you can even search for lawyers by location and practice area! Review the profiles in batches to make the information easier to digest and go to the firm website, if there is one, to find out more information.
 5. PSJD.org is particularly good for more **progressive, plaintiff-side firms**. You will need to register first (we subscribe on your behalf) and then you can run a “Search Organizations” narrowed to law firms.
 6. On Westlaw, check out the West Legal Directory (WLD).
 7. Use LinkedIn, and UC Hastings’ on-line alumni database.
 8. Talk to people -- **tell everyone you know** that you are looking for a job with a small firm that practices the area of law you want to practice.
- Search craigslist for advertised positions. Many postings do not identify the firm. If they call for an interview, make sure you **get as much information about them as possible** so you can do some research before you go to the interview.
 - Join state or local Bar Association groups of interest. Such groups often have many small firm members. **Go to an association event or seminar**; offer to help out if you can’t afford the entrance fee. Meet people, ask them about their work and how they ended up at that firm, collect business cards and add the firm names to your target firm list.
 - TALK TO PEOPLE, **show them your lists**, ask who you have left off and which firms you should take off your list.
 - If you have the time, think about getting a **law clerk job during the year** (check HCO and craigslist for these postings). These can turn into permanent jobs. Even if it doesn’t, often the lawyer you work for will give good advice, provide possible connections to other lawyers who are hiring and hopefully serve as a reference.

Who to contact at the firm?

- Direct your **letter to an individual**, not just to the firm. Here are some ways to figure out to whom to address the letter:

First choice: Write to someone you know at the firm personally or through a contact who agrees you can use their name (e.g., "Professor Smith suggested I contact you.").

Second choice: Direct your letter to a Hastings alum or an alum from your undergraduate institution who works at the firm.

Third Choice: Call the firm and ask who is in charge of hiring. If someone takes the time to speak with you, send a thank you email, even if they are not hiring at that time. Lawyers always appreciate being thanked for their time. Follow-up helps cement a relationship and helps them remember you.

Fourth Choice: Find the name of the most senior lawyer who seems to do the work you are interested in doing and direct your letter to that lawyer.

Fifth Choice: If you really want to work for a firm, particularly if you are a 2L looking for a summer job, think about putting on a suit (and your most professional attitude), visiting the firm (with copies of your resume, transcript and best writing sample in hand) and asking to speak with the person in charge of hiring. It is an aggressive approach, but hey, small firms need lawyers with chutzpah!

What you need to show small firms to get hired:

- You can **contribute from day one**. Many small firms believe experience is more important than grades.
- Experience that demonstrates a strong desire and **ability to learn on the job and assume responsibility** (e.g., clinical experience, internships or externships, working for a law firm or solo practitioner over the summer or during law school). Don't expect a formal training program - on-the-job training is the small firm way.
- Interest in and **passion** for the type of practice.
- Ability to **do a lot on your own** -- use computers, type your drafts, keep your own calendar, know court or agency procedures. Remember: small firms do not have large support staffs.
- Confidence, confidence and more confidence. The firm is looking to see how you **advocate for yourself** – that shows them how you'll advocate for their clients. It's not about how you did in law school; it's about how you demonstrate that you are developing into a good lawyer.
- You are a **problem-solver** who can work independently, yet know when to ask for help.
- The ability to articulate **why you want to work in a small firm** environment.

Additional resources: *Choosing Small, Choosing Smart: Job Search Strategies for Lawyers in the Small Firm Market* (NALP, 2d ed. 2005) by Donna Gerson, Esq.