

Basic Networking Skills Landed Me a Once-in-a-Lifetime Job

By Michael Chang on August 12th, 2013

My first job out of law school was a judicial clerkship for a life tenure federal judge.

Clerking is one of the most rewarding, intellectually-challenging experiences in a lawyer's career. Although I possessed the right credentials, so did other top graduates at the other Top-15 law schools around the country. It almost didn't happen for me. I was able to land the job in part because I instinctively put into practice some very basic networking skills.

As a 3L facing graduation, I had already lined up a couple of post-graduation job offers. By then, I had spent every law school Summer (as a 1L, 2L and 3L) clerking at large law firms. I wasn't necessarily looking for a change; I wasn't privy to all the different options that were available to us.

To my ambitious classmates — many who'd already demonstrated a certain aptitude by completing stints on the prestigious Law Review editorial board — starting out a career as a law clerk to a federal judge was a dream. Obtaining one was as competitive as Hollywood actors vying for the role of a lifetime. Having the right grades, activities and credentials were not enough. You had to be discovered. You had to be picked.

Although, like other top law school graduates, I did a mass-mailing of applications to clerk for a handful of federal judges based in California, I was not successful.

And, so, I was committed to starting out my legal career in a law firm environment.

During the Spring of my 3L year, I was invited to attend a BBQ party at the Fountain Valley house of an alumnus who graduated from the class before mine. Having served on law review together, I was fascinated by his post-law school career as a law clerk to a judge in the Central District. In my excitement, I forgot the time — it was approaching evening and, by then, most of the guests had left.

In part because I dreaded the dark, long drive up the 405 back to Santa Monica, I offered to help clean up. As it got dark outside, we brought our conversation to his kitchen. It was there that he casually mentioned that he was helping to arrange interviews for his successor, and asked me whether I would be interested in applying.

I hadn't thought about applying for a post-graduation job because I'd already lined up an associate position in a

law firm by then. But clerking for a federal judge is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a young lawyer. It was too hard to pass up.

I sent in my resume, with a detailed cover letter explaining my connection to the host of the BBQ, and my experience working with him on the Law Review. A few weeks later I made the jump — sacrificing a lucrative job as an associate at a large law firm to take what I felt was a once-in-a-lifetime career opportunity.

From this experience, I learned the value of networking. Even if you're satisfied with your job, it doesn't hurt to make new friends, broaden your knowledge and expand your community.

A career advisor recently commented to me that one of the goals of networking is to create opportunities where there are none. You can create opportunities by seizing the chance to differentiate yourself from the rest of the pack.

What better way to differentiate yourself from the rest of the attendees — whether you are at a bar meeting, a luncheon or a speaker event — than by arriving 15 minutes earlier, and leaving 15 minutes later, than everyone else? (And, it doesn't hurt to help your host do a little clean-up work afterwards.)

Seize the day. Try to make every networking opportunity unique to you.

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