

Consulting the Friendly Skies

“**Y**ou’re looking rather chipper today, Annabelle,” ace hiring partner Sherwood Corrigan told his Director of Almost Everything, Annabelle Under-Appreciated.

“I’m feeling pretty chipper.”

“Why’s that?”

“I’m resigning.”

“You always think of resigning, but you love me too much for that, don’t you?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Sherwood. Of course I love you, but in the past I’ve never had something to do when I left.”

“You got an offer from another firm?”

“No, I’d never leave you for that; the devil I know’s better than the one I don’t.”

“So what are you thinking of doing?”

“Airline consulting.”

“Airline consulting? What do you know about the airlines, Annabelle? It’s a very complicated business. I’d never underestimate your talents, but I don’t see American Airlines retaining you.”

“Oh, no, Sherwood, I guess I didn’t make myself clear. I’m thinking of consulting with large law firms based on my recent flight from Chicago to New York.”

“Can you spell that out a bit?”

“Certainly, delighted to. As soon as I got to my seat a flight attendant announced that the overhead bins were shared space and asked that passengers be considerate of fel-

low passengers by refraining from putting their coats up there until others had a chance to put in their luggage.”

“So?”

“Well, I think that principle needs to be applied around our firm, too. People share secretaries, conference rooms, all sorts of things. If lawyers were more considerate of the needs of other lawyers, the firm would make much better use of shared resources – and people would be happier, too.”

“A reasonable point. Did people on the plane listen to the request?”

“Some did and some didn’t. I’d say that those who didn’t were lawyers. At least they seemed to be carrying big briefcases.”

“That may be a bit unfair, Annabelle. But what came next?”

“The flight attendant asked everyone to turn off electronic devices.”

“And, what’s your point?”

“Lawyers ought to turn off their electronic devices from time to time, too. They’d be more efficient if they didn’t drop everything and answer each email and phone call as it came in. It would improve their mental health, too. And the pilot did a good job of communicating, the good news and the bad.”

“You mean he told you that the flight was going to be delayed?”

“More than that, he told us that the delay was due to an inspection of the hydraulic system. He said he knew we were wanting



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Carol's Column

This column draws on Carol Kanarek's unique perspective as an advisor to law students and consultant to large law firms. Carol can be reached at 212-371-0967 or ckanarek@aol.com.

Twenty-five years ago this fall I began my first year as an associate at a large (seventy five lawyers!) Manhattan law firm. There was no director of legal personnel to hold my hand, and no firm-wide orientation process for me or any of the eight other members of my law firm's first year associate class. Virtually every aspect of the earliest days of our legal careers—from learning how to receive an assignment to finding a friendly secretary to “show us the ropes”—required us to engage in independent thinking. We were already accustomed to that, anyway. In a world without Vault and The American Lawyer summer associates guide, we had learned to find creative ways of obtaining information about prospective employers during our first and second years of law school. We made our own hotel reservations for callbacks, found our own housing, and figured out for ourselves which lawyers we should emulate and which ones we should steer clear of. No one ever assigned us a mentor.

Superficially, the class of 2004 seems a great deal more polished than the class of 1979. They are much more worldly and cosmopolitan than we were, and most have resumes to die for. However, scratch those glossy surfaces and you find a whole lot of Stepford law students. They have been programmed (since birth, in some instances) to build those brilliant resumes so that they could get into the right law schools and land those big firm jobs. What's missing, in many cases, is the judgment and independent thinking that comes from having to make decisions and learning from one's mistakes.

The good news is that most of this year's law school graduates realize that they are missing something, even though they may not be quite sure what. They are hungry for information on how to survive and thrive in a world that is no longer governed by grades and internships. And – unlike those who graduated ten years ago – they are not generally distrustful of the older generation. So, the next time you are in the company of a first year associate, be sure to provide some context for your comments. Give the new lawyer your views of the law firm world and how it works, and chances are you'll connect on a level that will be beneficial to both of you.

Are You Serious?

When you are feeling particularly unkind, here are some comments for associates (or partners):

- 1) Thank you. We're all refreshed and challenged by your unique point of view.
- 2) The fact that no one understands you doesn't mean you're an artist.
- 3) I don't know what your problem is, but I'll bet it's hard to pronounce.
- 4) You have plenty of talent and vision. You just don't give a hoot.
- 5) I like you. You remind me of when I was young and stupid.
- 6) I'm not being rude. You're just insignificant.
- 7) Ahhh...I see the screw-up fairy has visited us again...
- 8) I will always cherish the initial misconceptions I had about you.

The Whole Truth

In interviews at firms around the country, I'm often struck by the way lawyers say things to me. Because I think they help bring home some truths, I use quotes in my reports.

Partners who have got the aptitude for recruitment have got to get involved. One good positive impression of a partner can make up for a lot of sins.

We've got to “step up to the plate and recruit as a great law firm.

We deal with problems; we put out fires. The firm is not planning when there isn't a crisis.

The firm is always looking for the next opportunity to take the next step. That's good, but it sometimes means that you lack the necessary pause to consolidate the gains and make sure that you are building a triple-A firm, and not just a big firm. There's not enough time or resources devoted to planning and to imbuing people with the firm's culture.

There is zero reward for doing well in recruitment and no penalty for not doing it at all.

The important thing is that _____ decides what type of firm it wants to be and makes those expectations clear so that there are no disillusionments.

We should be out there kicking ass and taking names. There is a feeling at _____ that we're “above that,” but it's not true.

clientSell

This crassly commercial section ballyhoos a consulting service, which could prove very useful to you (and, of course, profitable to me). Here's this issue's suggestion. Call (847) 864-7657 or e-mail arnie@kanterprofessional.com if you're interested. Additional consulting services can be found on my website at www.kanterprofessional.com

For most firms involved in recruitment, the end of the hiring season is a time to rejoice – not a time to devote more thought to the process. Unfortunately, these firms miss an important opportunity to learn from what has just happened and to review their hiring results and procedures systematically to identify possible improvements. Here is how we could work together to accomplish that. You will also provide me with detailed statistical data regarding your recruitment results. I will review this material. I will conduct a day or two of interviews after the hiring season with lawyers who were active in your recruitment process. I will then compile and report on the results of the above and meet with members of your hiring committee to discuss action based on my recommendations and findings.

Ask Arnie

Please submit your questions about recruitment or life. The swami will reply.

How can we conduct our in-firm interviewing more efficiently?

One very large law firm set aside a limited number of interview days (12) for flybacks in the fall. All of the in-firm interviewing was done this way. They convinced their lawyers to block out a concerted period of time on those days. This time was blocked out weeks in advance, and secretaries were instructed not to permit phone interruptions. The firm did a Power Point presentation about the firm for interviewees each day at the start of the day. The firm reported that the system helped keep people on time because the next interviewee was waiting at the door.



The Longer View

Most people involved with recruiting and managing lawyers feel they have enough to do dealing with what's on their plate today. This column will try to stimulate you to view things on a longer continuum, and to look to the future.

Many associates at large law firms find it difficult to feel that they are part of the firm. At best, they see themselves as part of the practice group in which they work (and, unfortunately, many do not even feel that). Of course, part of the reason for this lack of connection to the firm is the sheer size and geographical distribution of lawyers. Another part, though, is attributable to their feeling that they are not in touch with key decision-makers in the firm.

Breakfast is a much neglected opportunity to provide that contact with firm leaders. Ask your department or practice group heads to have periodic breakfasts with people in their area in a conference room at the firm. When your department or practice group heads are traveling to other offices, arrange for similar breakfasts in those offices. Of course, members of the management or executive committee can do the same when they travel (or in their home offices). These meetings will be a good opportunity for associates to feel more in touch with leaders at the firm and for those leaders to gain a better sense of the pulse of associates at the firm.

Idea of the Quarter

At the height of the interview season, it's hard to get all of the candidates you want into the office. Conduct several evenings of call back interviews at the firm. Start at 5:30 or 6:00 in the evening and require everyone on the hiring committee, plus a group of your best interviewers, to stay around for a few hours to conduct interviews. After interviews, bring all of the interviewees and the interviewers together for wine and hors d'ourves. One firm that has tried this reports that they are able to interview 25 to 30 people each evening. Give law students a choice as to whether or not they would like to participate in evening interviews.

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to take off and that so was he, but that it was important to make sure everything was safe. He showed some empathy, told us exactly what the problem was and convinced us that it was necessary.”

“So none of the passengers protested?”

“Right. He also told us what our projected flight and arrival times were, and updated those later in the flight. He spared us the information about what altitude we'd be flying at. Frankly, I'm content to leave that to him. It's a little like the damn weather man telling me about the barometer and the high and low pressure systems, Sherwood. I want to know whether it's going to rain and what the temperature is going to be. If the weather man wants to talk to his weather buddies about the barometer, that's fine with me, but he can leave me out.”

“So, it's possible to communicate too much?”

“Aha. Do you know any of your clients or partners who suffer from that?”

“No comment. You're a tough cookie, Annabelle.”

“I would have thought you knew that already. The pilot also was kind enough not to thank us for our patience. Each time I hear a pilot say that I want to punch him in the nose. I don't appreciate being thanked for what I don't like and can do nothing about.”

“What about once the flight got underway? Pick up any other consulting advice?”

“Absolutely. The pilot gave us good advice, subtly tried to modify our behavior and reminded us of some of the advantages we had.”

“Let's take them one at a time, what advice did he give you?”

“To keep our seat belt buckled because of possible unexpected turbulence. Our lawyers would be well advised to heed that as well. Practicing law is tough, but it can be made easier by anticipating the turbulence. Sometimes you can avoid a conflict by keeping people fully informed of your schedule. You also may be able to anticipate and avoid some turbulence by getting a backup in advance.”

“How did the pilot subtly modify your behavior?”

“By pointing out that flight attendants were there primarily for our safety. That might inhibit some passenger from ringing the bell three times for coffee refills, or to see whether there's a deck of cards on board.”

“And the advantages that you were reminded of?”

“He told us about the extra space between the rows in the “main cabin” (I prefer “main cabin” to “coach” which always seems to me to mean “steerage”). Though I think we're all aware of and appreciate the extra room, it never hurts to be reminded.”

“Any consulting advice on your descent?”

“Yes, some of the best advice came on our descent (by the way, I'm glad that they have canned “final approach.” I always liked to think that I might have at least one more approach into the city). The flight attendant cautioned us to use care in opening the overhead bin because luggage may have shifted during the flight.”

“And how does that translate into law firm consulting advice?”

“Well, if inert luggage can move in a period of a couple of hours, maybe it's worth keeping in mind that people may be able to shift over a period of time as well. Your partners should not continue to judge associates on something they did or said years ago; or at least give them the benefit of the possibility that they may have changed.”

“It may be easier for luggage to shift, than for people to change, but I take your point. Anything else?”

“Yes, the pilot told us that he knew we had a choice of other airlines and thanked us for choosing American. Our best associates have a lot of choices, and it wouldn't hurt us to keep that in mind and to thank them from time to time. Not only did the pilot thank us over the intercom, he was also standing at the door to thank us in person. That sort of personal thank you is a lot more meaningful to people than a broadcast thank you.”

“Well, Annabelle, I have to admit that I hadn't thought about airlines as a source of consulting advice. You put things in a new light.”

“That's part of the message, Sherwood. It's helpful to think of how you can learn from a situation very different from your own. If you don't think outside the box, at least increase the size of your box.”

“Hey, Annabelle, what about the airlines' frequent flyer programs? Those may have something to teach us, too. Shouldn't we find a way to reward associates who work frequently for us in some small, expected way? It wouldn't take much, the important thing is showing that you are thinking about them.”

“Nice work, Sherwood. I may consider taking you on with me in my new consulting business – as a junior partner.”