

SECOND CAREER LAWYERS

a.k.a .“Mature Students”

- ◆ People come to the practice of law for many different reasons and at many different times in their lives. At our law school, you are likely to find many students who have gone directly from high school to university and then law school, with little or no break.
- ◆ On the other hand, “**second career lawyers**” (“**SCL**”) come to law school later in life, having had more-or-less traditional career paths with breaks during and after undergraduate school. These breaks may have been a result of undertaking professional and other careers; lengthy stints studying other disciplines; child rearing; economic dislocation in industry; or their own physical conditions.
- ◆ With more life experience than many of your classmates, and the perspective that age brings, you may have some of the same experiences as your peers when you look for legal employment, but you may also face different and challenging obstacles unknown to students who have followed the more “traditional route.”

The Obstacles

- ◆ While the question “Why did you decide to go to law school?” is often asked of all prospective employees, SCLs frequently see it is a tough, not easily answerable question. When an SCL answers this question, the response is likely to be extremely thoughtful, and often thought provoking, because they may have chosen law at great personal and financial sacrifice or they may have to invoke painful past experiences. This question is inevitable; as an SCL, you should take it as the opportunity to introduce yourself, and to share your story. It is an opportunity to demonstrate your sincere commitment to your new chosen profession and the maturity with which you are approaching this stage of your life. If the employer does not ask this question, you should still answer it, to clear up any lingering doubts in the interviewer’s mind about your sincerity and goals.

The Challenges

- ◆ When an SCL intends to incorporate a speciality into an area of law (for example, a computer engineer who wants to practice intellectual property law; a doctor who wants to specialize in medical malpractice) you may find you know more than your interviewer. Be cognizant of how you display your knowledge and experience. You would like your interviewer to feel that you will have something unique and valuable to contribute to an organization. You do not want them to think that you feel you are above an entry level position in the new profession (because after it is all it is a new career), or would not fit in with other employees.
- ◆ When an SCL has a speciality in which you have worked professionally, there must be a delicate balancing act performed. You must demonstrate your technical expertise, point to your accomplishments and multiple contacts in the field. At the same time, you must ensure that the prospective employer knows that you know this is a new career for you and there is still a lot to learn about the practice of law. You must emphasize that you are a team player, willing to take direction, while learning to be a lawyer.

Food for thought

- ◆ One important interviewing technique to keep in mind when embarking on your job search as an SCL is to remember that not every prospective employer or interviewer was themselves a “traditional law student.” Many lawyers have come to the profession after other successful careers or other life choices and may share your perspective. It is always smart interviewing sense to learn about your interviewers and their organization, but it is especially crucial for an SCL to discover if such a shared connection exist.

The Expectations

- ◆ What is often mistaken for age discrimination may be a candidate's failure to communicate his/her understanding of the culture of the organization to which s/he is applying and their place as a "new lawyer." For example, you should prepare to answer the question "Do you expect to make more/less/the same salary with legal training than you did before coming to law school?" This is not an opportunity to discuss your debt load, your previous salary level or the state of the legal profession. Rather it is an attempt by the prospective employer to gauge your willingness to accept an entry level position in your new profession.
- ◆ Another topic to address with tact and sensitivity is the issue of responsibility. Implicitly or explicitly, interviewers will be trying to judge whether you expect to be given more responsibility or autonomy because of your prior career. Or they may be trying to determine whether you expect to be given this responsibility sooner than younger colleagues. Either way, you should convey an eagerness to learn and do all the tasks a young lawyer is expected to do. For example, employers often comment on prospective articling students who state in an interview that given their experience as an engineer/doctor/musician etc., they do not expect to do photocopying. No articling student wants to do photocopying; but every prospective articling student should appreciate that this may be expected because you are in an entry level position at the bottom of the institutional hierarchy. It is to your advantage to demonstrate to interviewers and prospective employers that you are willing to do whatever it takes to embrace your new profession. An assumption of competence or superiority will be detrimental to your ability to convince an employer of your intention to embark on a new career.
- ◆ Another issue of concern on the part of some prospective employers is whether an SCL will be able to take direction from a supervisor who is younger. Whether an interviewer voices this issue or not, you should emphasize your ability to work as part of a team and your respect for people from whom you expect to learn.
- ◆ Some prospective employers may wonder about your willingness to put in long hours and work very hard, having presumably already done that in your "first" career. It is entirely possible that you could accomplish in 50 hours what another articling student might do in 80 hours because you bring to your position a set of well-developed, focused work habits. However, your ability and/or desire to work hard is yet another issue that you should underscore either directly or indirectly

Discrimination

- ◆ Unfortunately, you may encounter employers who simply cannot get past the notion of someone leaving a secure career to attend law school. You may encounter employers who do not understand your desire to have studied other, perhaps less profitable areas, extensively and in depth, before changing course to pursue a more practical career in law. You will encounter employers who cannot imagine that other colleagues will be able to work efficiently with a more mature, more experienced articling student or lawyer. If these ideas and biases are raised in an interview, **meet them head-on** with assurances and explanations designed to remove these inaccurate assumptions from the interviewer's mind. If these assumptions are undercutting your ability to interview successfully, again you may want to confront them and do your best to allay concerns. However, in some cases the notions are deep-seated, while wrong-headed. You should use your networking skills and contacts to learn about employers with a history of hiring SCLs as law students (just look to the SCLs in the upper years for example) and focus on those organizations.

Remember: Do not consider these questions and concerns in a hostile manner. Rather, use them as a opportunity to demonstrate the unique skills, interests and abilities you will be bring to the profession having had "a life before law school." It is up to you to demonstrate your maturity, judgement and eagerness to bring your life experiences to law practice.