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LGBT Law

Tips for Being a Successful Gay Job Candidate

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Special to the Legal

It's time for an interview, and you're ready. Your suit is back from the dry cleaner. Your resumé is printed on nice paper. You've Googled the interview address and calculated how long it's going to take you to get there. You've checked the website of your prospective employer and studied the bios of the people you're going to meet. You think you're fully prepared, but wait—what to do about the gay thing?

As members of the LGBT community, our diversity is not written on our faces. It is not displayed in our skin color or in our accents. In fact, LGBT diversity—our diversity—is in many ways its own unique animal. Unlike other diverse candidates, you can choose whether to highlight your status as a member of the LGBT community or not discuss it at all. In other words, you are entirely in control of the decision whether to be gay or not gay in an interview.

This decision can be a challenging one. On one hand, barriers to those in the LGBT community are falling at a historic pace. Diversity is widely recognized as both an important cultural value and as a business necessity, and law firms, government agencies and corporations recognize more and more the value of multiple perspectives. The



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workforces of many firms and agencies are also underrepresented by gay lawyers, so recruiting from that population is a priority. From this perspective, it's a good time to be a gay applicant.

On the other hand, the LGBT community has a long way to go to be fully integrated into the mainstream. It is still acceptable in some firms and corporations to be homophobic or transphobic. Some more senior attorneys and personnel are so ignorant of the LGBT

community that they would rather reject gay candidates than have to discuss their orientation. With these types of employers, being a gay applicant can be harmful to your career.

So where does that leave you, a member of the LGBT community who is preparing for on-campus interviews this fall or thinking about changing jobs sometime in the future? How do you play the gay card? Should you "come out" in your interview? And if you do, just how gay is too gay?

No two candidates will answer these questions in the same manner, and there is no one-size-fits-all advice that will be useful in all interviewing situations. However, the following four tips fit almost every situation. If nothing else, they will get you started considering the issues you need to think about in landing that job.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION WILL NOT GET YOU A JOB

Don't lead with your "gayness." To a potential employer, your sexual orientation is not the most interesting or relevant thing about you. Of course, your diversity is an important aspect of who you are, but it is relatively low on the list of what makes a candidate a great lawyer. Law firms do not want to hire attorneys just because they are diverse. They want lawyers who are focused, accomplished and determined to suc-

ceed. If that attorney happens to be gay or lesbian, so much the better, but sexual orientation is secondary to the attributes that are both relevant to the hiring decision and critical for success.

For example, you should certainly tell an interviewer about your experiences over the summer during your internship at an LGBT youth center. You should not tell that interviewer about your experiences over the summer during a house party in Provincetown. The discussion of yourself as a diverse attorney should be a natural extension of the story of your life and work experience.

This tip may seem obvious, but it is shocking how often interviewees blur these lines. Above all, keep it professional. You should use the time with each interviewer to highlight your intelligence, maturity and experience. Those attributes will get you the job; your sexual orientation will not (and if it does, question whether this is the right career move for you).

LEAVE HINTS ON YOUR RESUMÉ

To highlight your diversity in an appropriate manner, drop some smart hints in your resumé. You can indicate that you are a member of a gay rugby team or provide legal aid to individuals living with HIV. Of course, you do not need to be gay to engage in any of those activities, but this will give you a jumping-off point to discuss your diversity in an interview.

The most obvious way to indicate your diversity is to list that you are (or were) a member of your school's LGBT group. Recruiting professionals are keenly aware of these groups and their involvement in the LGBT community, and they will often provide you with the opportunity to discuss diversity issues as a result.

One point of caution, however: Whether your law school group is called OutLaw or something else altogether, be sure to briefly describe the purpose of each group. While recruiting professionals are almost always in

the know, many interviewers do not know what the groups are. (Have you heard the very true story of the attorney who thought that OutLaw was either an a capella group or a gun club?) You may even want to consider spelling out what LGBT means. You would be surprised how many people are ignorant of the acronym.

ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

For many LGBT candidates, whether a firm or corporation embraces its gay attorneys is often one of the most important questions they can ask. If this matters to you, be straightforward about it. Ask, "Can you tell me about the way that this firm supports gay and lesbian associates?" or, "I don't believe I've had the chance to meet with any gay associates. Can you tell if there is representation within the associate body?" Any firm, agency or corporation that supports diversity will be happy to answer these questions.

You will learn a lot about an employer in the responses you receive to these questions. Keep in mind, however, that just because one person in an organization may seem uncomfortable answering questions about LGBT issues does not mean that the organization itself doesn't embrace LGBT employees.

Questions about how welcoming an employer may be to LGBT employees can be awkward to pose to a complete stranger. The best advice is just to wait to ask the right person. Do your research and determine whether any of the attorneys you will be meeting is LGBT. Or call the hiring coordinator and ask if you can meet with a gay associate. He or she gets this request all the time, so don't hesitate to ask. The more informed you can be, the better.

BE YOURSELF

Above all, be yourself. First of all, no one interviews well if they are trying to be someone they're not. Second, interviewers are turned off by candidates who seem phony or uncomfortable in

their skin. You are who you are; some organizations will embrace that and others will not. In most cases, whether you get the job will have nothing to do with your sexual orientation. It will have to do with your background, your experience, your potential and your ability to be a good fit within the organization.

That said, if it turns out that a firm rejects you because you're gay, bi or transsexual, be thankful that it did. You just dodged a major bullet. You don't want to work at any place that is going to judge you on anything other than your merits. Whether you are L, G, B, T or straight, you want a job at an organization that provides you with challenging work, recognizes your accomplishments, compensates you fairly, treats you equitably and enables you to work with colleagues whom you like and respect. If you can't be yourself at your workplace, or if your sexual orientation—rather than your talents and abilities—is going to be factored into your success, then don't accept any position offered.

You will spend more hours in the company of your colleagues at work than you will with your spouse or partner. It really matters, therefore, that you feel comfortable in the work environment you are selecting and that you can be yourself there. That's why it's worth the effort to find out as much as you can about the experience of other LGBT attorneys at your future employer. Ideally, what you will hear is that their sexual orientation is entirely irrelevant, that their partner is a welcome participant in the life of the organization, and that diversity is prevalent in all of its forms throughout the company. If that's what you hear, jump at the job. •