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Landing a Small-Firm Job Took Something Extra

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For the first few months of his job search, Bruce Weisenberg played by the book, researching law firms, targeting hiring partners and tailoring cover letters -- with little success.

Then he had an eye-opening meeting: During an interview in December with a small Los Angeles firm, a partner told him that in the three days since the firm had posted an ad for the position, more than 1,000 resumes had come in.

"That was a discouraging moment, when I realized just exactly how many folks were in my situation and how difficult the challenge would be to stick out as particularly valuable or someone worth taking a chance on," said Weisenberg, 41.

He began to view the job hunt as a numbers game. In addition to applying to advertised positions, he unleashed what he describes as a carpet-bombing strategy. He wrote a general cover letter, ran it by several working lawyers, and sent it to 200 random attorneys a day.

For every 600 blind e-mails, he said, he'd usually land one interview. "It's two or three days of administrative work, then you go to put on the suit on the third day," said Weisenberg, who had earned his J.D. from the University of Arizona's James E. Rogers College of Law in May 2008 and had started his job search that fall.

In the spring, one of the e-mails reached Claudia Lozano, an associate at [Lynch, Gilardi & Grummer](#). She, in turn, forwarded it to Arif Virji, managing partner of the 16-lawyer San Francisco litigation firm. At the time, Virji was recruiting for an associate with at least two years of experience, preferably in employment and construction law, the firm's focus. He was specifically not looking for a first-year.

Today, though, Weisenberg is three months into his employment at Lynch Gilardi and impressing his new colleagues and at least one client. His story illustrates how some small law firms, particularly in a recession, need something extra beyond academic training before making an investment in a freshly minted law graduate.

The last time Lynch Gilardi had hired a first-year straight out of law school was 2007, and the firm had been reducing its summer associate program. A decade ago, when the firm was about 30 lawyers, the firm hosted between five and eight students, of whom two or three would get offers. But by 2006, the partners had decided recruiting straight from law school no longer made sense: Virji said he saw the beginnings of clients questioning why they were paying for the training of new associates, usually while discussing a bill. That trend accelerated in the last year. "It's become not so much a choice among clients, it's become mandatory," he said. "They're looking how to cut costs to survive."



Despite all that, Weisenberg's cover letter caught his eye.

Next to experience in the legal profession, Virji said, clients stress an understanding of the business world -- Weisenberg had an MBA and business experience. He had worked for Nurse Providers, a health care staffing and home care business, for nearly four years, as director of operations and business development. "He was basically running the company for the owner," Virji said. "He did everything from HR to finances to accounting -- he had a broad exposure to business."

While Weisenberg's background got him a foot in the door, Virji said, in interviews he persuaded the firm he'd work extra hard to make up for his lack of legal experience. "I think we made it very clear that if we hired him we'd be making a big exception," Virji said. "He did a good job selling himself -- that he would spend whatever time it takes of his own time to come up to speed."

In late May, Weisenberg started at Lynch Gilardi, where Virji said he is paid an entry-level salary of just under \$100,000, and his billing rate is between \$200 and \$300.

Client Joanne Gootman, administrative manager at Pacific Plaza Hotels, recently worked with Weisenberg on an employment law matter. "I try to make the dollar go as far as I can all the time," said Gootman, adding that she doesn't take matters to outside counsel unless it's absolutely necessary. She said it was attractive to work with someone who had been in her shoes. "I believe I would've been much more frustrated if I was dealing with a rookie fresh out of law school," she said. "We cut to the chase on many items because he got it."

Other firms Lynch Gilardi's size similarly have questioned the need to recruit through a summer program.

[Brydon Hugo & Parker](#), a 28-lawyer San Francisco product liability and toxic tort firm, never relied on one to grow, and when the firm tried it, the effort yielded mixed results, founding partner John Brydon said.

Brydon Hugo is interviewing to add one associate with two to three years of litigation experience before the end of the year. The last time it hired a first-year was two years ago, and the associate, at age 35, had "life experience."

"We have clients that are pushing cases to trial and we need to get people who can hit the ground running," Brydon said. He also noted the cost of training a green lawyer feels especially burdensome during slow economic times.

Though Lynch Gilardi's Virji was apprehensive about Weisenberg's lack of experience, so far, he isn't regretting making an exception. The managing partner starts his day at the office at 6 a.m., and has noticed that Weisenberg comes in earlier than most and leaves later than most. "If he starts to come in earlier than me, then I'll be really impressed."