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Breaking Into BigLaw Without A BigLaw Resume

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360, New York (September 8, 2016, 1:34 PM ET) -- Scan the attorney profiles on any BigLaw website, and you'll notice a trend: a majority of the attorneys have likely attended just a handful of the nation's most prestigious law schools, and many of them have followed very similar career paths.

But that homogenous profile isn't true of everyone in BigLaw. There are a number of lawyers who have taken less traditional paths and have found tremendous success at large law firms.

For example, the executive chairman of Greenberg Traurig LLP, one of the largest law firms in the U.S., went to law school at night at St. John's University while running a business and supporting his family, according to the firm's global chair of professional development, Bradford Kaufman.

"I'm going to guess that Richard wouldn't have been hired by Cravath out of law school. He came in here as an associate in the '80s and rose to become a huge part of the engine that drives this law firm," Kaufman said. "I personally believe that people of the highest quality don't exclusively reside at the top law schools in the country."

But that doesn't mean law firms are not looking for excellence, he said. It's just that there are many ways to demonstrate talent and excellence aside from the prestige of your law school.

Here, experts offer three ways lawyers can break into BigLaw without a top tier J.D. on their resume.

Understand the Future of Law

The legal industry is changing at a rapid pace. There is a disaggregation of legal services in which a portion of the work once performed by law firms has been passed along to alternative legal services providers or is performed in-house, leaving law firms scrambling for solutions to major structural and identity crises.

"The legal world is changing so quickly — the entire thought process of who you're hiring, how you're training them needs to change. If you're not constantly thinking about these things, you're going to be run over," Kaufman said. "What we are interested in is people who can help us understand where the future of law is so we can start to get there before everyone else does."

The best way an applicant can demonstrate to a BigLaw firm that they would be a valuable addition is by showing that they understand the business of law and where it's heading, according to John Remsen, founder of The Remsen Group.

"When you go to interview, you're going to distinguish yourself from all these others because you understand the business of law and the fact that firms do need to understand business," Remsen said.

Asking questions like, "What's the firm's long-term strategic plan?" and "What's the track to partnership?" will pique the interest of hiring officials far more than questions about starting salary and vacation time, he said.

"Law firms are really starting to look for those young people who demonstrate leadership qualities and really understand the business side of things," he said.

Build a Strong Book of Business

According to Remsen, bringing sizable clients and big cases or deals to a law firm will make any candidate an attractive lateral hire, regardless of their academic credentials.

"If you bring a book of business to a law firm, that kind of trumps everything," Remsen said.

He suggested that graduates of less prestigious law schools should look at starting out at a midsized law firm and then building a robust practice by targeting young, growing companies that require increasingly sophisticated legal services.

Starting out on a less traditional path to BigLaw may actually be an advantage when it comes to making partner, according to Ken Young, co-founder of Young Mayden Legal Search. He pointed to the difficulty many senior associates face at elite law firms, where only a small percentage of associates are made partner.

"The current exception to the rule, unfortunately, is a young lawyer who starts at BigLaw and eventually makes partner ... because law firms want an equity partner to have a big book of business," Young said.

He explained that it's often a very difficult and unlikely task for an associate to develop their own book of business when they're working exclusively for institutional clients, and yet they also have a slim chance of inheriting those clients that belong to senior partners of the firm.

The current best path to equity partner at a BigLaw firm, according to Young, is to either leave another BigLaw firm and take large clients to the new firm, develop a practice at a midsized or boutique firm that commands high rates and is desirable to a BigLaw firm or leave the legal department of a big corporation that has chosen to outsource some of its work and take the work to a BigLaw firm.

"But at the end of the day, it is all about how much in client billings one controls. That is the best leverage and job security a lawyer can have in today's world," Young said.

Bring More to the Table Than a J.D.

According to Kaufman, he looks for the intangible things in applicants that demonstrate that they may one day make a good partner, or even leader, of his law firm.

He said that some of the most valuable things someone can demonstrate on their resume is that they have the ability to think for themselves, in their own way, by doing something like starting their own business or by demonstrating a strong commitment by illustrating that they've accomplished something that takes a tremendous amount of discipline.

"I'm always really impressed when someone says they were a first chair violinist in their community orchestra, or they are a distance marathon runner," he said.

Strong leadership skills are another soft skill law firms would benefit from seeking out in future associates, according to Remsen.

"Those who were the president of their class or were leaders in extracurricular activities, these are the folks that have leadership qualities," he said.

BigLaw hopefuls can also demonstrate their value to a law firm by showing that they have a degree, skill or career outside of law that would be useful to a law firm.

"A lot of intellectual property lawyers are chemists or engineers. They went to the top schools in the country in that area and then went to law school," Remsen said. "They may not have gone to

the best law schools because they were working their way through school, but they have a very unique skill set.”

He said the same can go for a lawyer who has had a career in an industry that the law firm wants to serve or who has an MBA and can tackle the business challenges facing a law firm.

--Editing by Christine Chun and Kelly Duncan.