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Interview Insider



Ready to Introduce
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A+B = Emily Mao



Alston & Bird
In Our Community



Alston & Bird
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The Charlotte
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Welcome

Diversity is important because it is critical to our culture and who we are at Alston & Bird. I have a fierce belief in the importance of each individual having the right to equal footing - equal opportunity - to strive, achieve and ultimately succeed in whatever they choose to do. Our goal is to provide an environment where every lawyer and staff member, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, creed, sexual orientation, age, or social or geographic background can succeed and reach their fullest potential.



John L. Latham
Diversity Partner

Insight From an Interview Insider

Derin Dickerson Answers Questions from Both Sides of the Interview Table

Derin Dickerson is a Litigation and Trial Practice Group associate at Alston & Bird. As a student at the University of Alabama School of Law, he experienced the rigors of fall on-campus interviewing. Now he sits on the other side of the table as an interviewer for Alston & Bird's Atlanta office. We were able to catch up with Derin to get the inside scoop on how to tackle the law firm interview.

Why did you decide to interview with Alston & Bird?

Derin: When I was in law school, I focused my search on three cities: Nashville, Birmingham and Atlanta. I did research on the firms in the cities that I wanted to interview with and I interviewed with a number of firms through the on-campus interview process at my school. I had a

friend who had accepted an offer to come and work at Alston & Bird full time, and she always told me great things about the firm. My research confirmed her praise about the firm.

How did you prepare for the interview?

Derin: I developed an approach and style over time, and I concluded that it was important to establish rapport with the interviewers. They like to talk about things that they're interested in, so I just wanted to be myself when I went into the interview and have a conversation with the person interviewing me.



Derin B. Dickerson
Associate
Atlanta Office

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Insight From an Interview Insider cont...

Sometimes candidates feel intimidated by on-campus interviewers. Prior to your interview, did you have any feelings like this; and if so, how were you able to overcome them in your interview?

Derin: I did have feelings like that, and I think that our society to an extent kind of elevates the status of lawyers. People are intimidated by lawyers generally; and growing up, I didn't have a connection or a relationship with many lawyers so I was somewhat intimidated initially during my interviews. Over time, I became more comfortable. I realized that lawyers are people too.

Interviewing is a two-way street. What is some of the information candidates should try to obtain from their interview?

Derin: You are right. Interviewing is a two-way street. What the candidate is trying to find out is whether the law firm would be a good place for them and whether it's some place that they would want to work. So it's important in an interview to ask questions that are not superficial, such as "What's your summer program like?" You should ask questions that are geared to finding out about the overall environment. Do people typically have families or not? Is it a pretty diverse firm? What do people do for fun? Does everyone do the same thing on the weekends? Just find out if it's the type of place where you would enjoy working.

As a diverse candidate did you think it was important for you to establish common ground with your interviewers? If so, how did you do this?

Derin: Absolutely, I think that is one of the most important things to establishing a connection with someone is to have common ground, and that's how people develop relationships and learn to get along. I went to school in Alabama and I interviewed a lot in Alabama, and college football was a big thing there. If I knew someone else was an Alabama fan, I would typically bring that up, and that gives us a common basis from which to build our conversation and our relationship.

How do candidates develop common ground quickly, since you have limited interview time?

Derin: That's a good question. In this day and age of the Internet and Google, you could always find things out about people. The attorneys' bios are on the firm's websites so you can find out something about a person and what they're interested in. If it's a call-back interview and you are in their office, they might have pictures or books or something that you can talk about.

I've learned, and this is true for me too, people like to talk about nothing more than themselves. If you can get someone talking about themselves, they're happy and they think you're an even more pleasant person if you ask good questions about their personal interests.

Now that you're on the other side of the table as an interviewer, what are some things that candidates can avoid doing so as not to hurt their chances for a call back?

Derin: I think the most important thing when you go into an interview is to be yourself. Whoever you are, that's who you should be. I always thought it was important to inject humor into my interviews. I think that fits with my personality type; but if that's not your personality, then it's not going to come off well. As a result, people are not going to take you seriously, and it can affect your chances of getting a call back. Also, you don't want to do or say anything that could be construed as offensive. A lot of times we have a tendency to say something that we interpret one way, but someone else may interpret it in the worst possible way; and you don't want that to happen.

What about for those candidates that don't necessarily have an outgoing personality? How can they still make an impact in an interview?

Derin: I found that no matter how quiet or shy an individual is there's always something that makes them tick. For some people, it's their kids. For other people, it's their hobbies or their work. I think you should accentuate that and it will bring out your personality more and more.

What are some qualities that you look for when interviewing candidates?

Derin: At Alston & Bird, we look for candidates that are qualified on paper. In other words, they have shown some proficiency for academic success which leads us to believe that they'll ultimately be successful in their legal careers. Once you get to the interview, I think the most important thing is whether the candidate is the type of person that we would enjoy working with; and so we look for qualities such as honesty, trust, character and personality.

What are some factors that you consider when you have to make a tough call on a candidate?

Derin: When there are several candidates that we evaluated similarly and we can't make distinctions between them, we look at diversity of experiences

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Ready to Introduce Your Resume?

A Cover Letter Can Speak Volumes About You

Cover letters tend to get a bad rap. They are often viewed by many as a chore to write. There is a consensus among some people that they are rarely read. While others believe, a truly successful cover letter must inspire the prose of Shakespeare or the comedy of Jerry Seinfeld. Fortunately, we had the opportunity to let Erin Springer, Attorney Hiring Manager for Alston & Bird's Atlanta office, weigh in on the importance of the "seemingly elusive" cover letter.

Every year Springer has the amazing opportunity to meet hundreds of applicants at her desk. Each candidate presents themselves, one by one, to have their turn. This moment of one-on-one time happens when Springer begins to read their cover letter. Based upon her experience, she says that she receives one of three types of introductions—"good, bad or indistinguishable."

Springer describes a good cover letter as one that quickly lets her know the position the applicant wants to receive consideration for, sounds professional and speaks about the candidate personally. When an applicant details sincere reasons why they want to secure an opportunity in a particular practice group, spend a summer in Atlanta or begin a career with Alston & Bird, Springer is provided with "a way of learning more about [a candidate] besides just what's on their resume or transcript." Springer suggests that candidates incorporate authenticity in their cover letters by adding an additional paragraph to the standard three paragraph structure. She says, "If we're on the fence about somebody, the cover letter can give us a little bit of background and make the difference [in receiving an interview]."

In stark contrast, Springer has common encounters with bad cover letters. She can recount numerous instances of incorrect salutations, poor grammar usage, candidate interest in practice areas we do not have or attempts to be cute, funny, or dramatic. For example, one applicant who was not selected for an on-campus interview, in an attempt to stand out, submitted a second application. According to Springer, "All the cover letter said was that we had made a grave mistake by not conducting an interview or hiring this person. The applicant went on to talk about all the reasons why our firm had made this horrible mistake." Finally the applicant ended the cover letter by saying, "if you know what's good for you, you'll call me for an interview." This candidate's attempt to be humorous was perceived as unprofessional and offensive.

Although applicants may not cross the fine line of inappropriate cover letter etiquette, they still can run the risk of not catching the resume reviewer's eye. Springer mentions that there are cover letters that seem to follow a set format. It is apparent that there was little time or energy invested in it. She says, "The candidate's just regurgitating what's on the resume; and those can sometimes seem like it's a waste of time to read." Springer cautions, "it can be very obvious when somebody has mail-merged their cover letters; and people need to be very careful about that."

As you begin to embark on preparing your next cover letter, remember it is an invaluable opportunity to present yourself to the recruiter. A first impression is a lasting impression. If you invest the time in communicating your personal story and interest in your prospective employer in an accurate, compelling way, you can make a significant impact on hiring managers, such as Erin Springer; and introduce your resume to the top of the stack. ■



Erin L. Springer
Attorney Hiring Manager
Atlanta Office

A+B = Emily Mao

One Washington Partner Shares Her Formula for Success at Alston & Bird

In December 2006, Emily Mao achieved another milestone in her legal career. She was elected to the partnership of Alston & Bird. As a member of the Employee Benefits and Executive Compensation Group, Emily handles tax and ERISA issues relating to retirement, executive compensation and health and welfare plans. A normal day in the office for her includes advising clients, participating in conference calls with clients and/or other attorneys at the firm and working on variety of projects, such as advising employers on all aspects of the design and administration of retirement plans, health plans and executive compensation plans.



Emily W. Mao
Partner
Washington DC Office

Emily's path to a large law firm was not the traditional legal path, and she never worked as a summer associate. After graduating from law school, she used her legal education to gain valuable experience working for the federal government and on Capitol Hill. Before joining Alston & Bird, Emily spent a combined total of seven years working for the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, Congressman Jim McDermott (D-WA), the U.S. Department of Treasury and the United States Tax Court.

A= Aim high to achieve your goal.

While working on Capitol Hill on tax legislative issues, Emily determined that she wanted to obtain a position as a corporate tax associate at a large firm. To gain additional credibility with law firms, while working full-time, Emily enrolled part-time in the LL.M. program in Taxation at the Georgetown University Law Center. After a few classes, Emily decided to change her focus from corporate tax to the taxation of employee benefit plans. Although it was hard to go back to school, three year later Emily completed the program with distinction. She credits her LL.M. coursework with helping her to land her first law firm job.

B= Build client relationships.

Since joining Alston & Bird as an associate in January 2000, Emily's responsibilities have evolved and she is now the primary contact for a number of the firm's employee benefits clients. This happened naturally as she spent more time working with clients. According to Emily, "If clients perceive you as responsive and thoughtful and you provide them with good legal advice, they will keep you busy." One important way to develop client trust is by managing expectations. Emily learned that if you tell clients when they can expect their project to be completed, and you actually meet your deadline, they can be more understanding of time constraints. Another way to support your client relationships is by increasing your knowledge in the field and being aware of changes in the law and how these changes will impact the client. As a result, Emily spends a portion of her time working on non-billable projects such as articles and presentations on employee benefits topics.

Emily provides some tips on how you can craft your formula for success as an attorney at a large law firm.

- **If you know what area of the law you want to specialize in, learn as much about this area as you can while in law school. If your school offers courses in these areas, enroll in them. Chances are you will learn something new, and when you are given your first research project, you will have a better understanding of the project.**
- **When interviewing for a summer associate position, look for a firm that has a strong practice in your area of interest. The ability to focus on one area of the law right away will help you develop your own expertise faster.**
- **Read the newspaper and be aware of current events that may impact your area of interest. Be ready to talk about relevant events during an interview.**
- **Be open to new things.**

As Emily's own post-law school experience demonstrates, your first legal job does not determine the outcome of your legal career. ■

Alston & Bird In Our Community

New York Attorneys and Summer Associates Pledge Their Services to WIN

Women In Need, Inc. (WIN), is a nonprofit organization that serves over 7,500 people including 4,500 children who are homeless and disadvantaged in the New York City area. Throughout the year, Alston & Bird attorneys in our New York office donate their time and legal services to give eviction prevention assistance to many of the people served by WIN.

This eviction prevention program, known as the Legal Clinic for the Homeless, requires our attorneys to provide advice, advocacy and representation at administrative hearings on issues such as assessing and challenging denials of public benefits, including public assistance, Medicaid, food stamps, public housing and public housing subsidies.

In June, our 2007 summer associates had an opportunity to spend time providing a dose of fun to some of the children from WIN. Partnering with New York Cares, an organization that is dedicated to promoting community service and volunteerism in the area, our summer associates participated in a scavenger hunt with 25 children from Jennie Clarke, a Women In Need transitional housing facility for families in East Harlem. The summer associates and children spent an entire day searching for clues at one of the world's preeminent institutions for scientific research and education, the American Museum of Natural History. Following the scavenger hunt, all of the participants watched a show in the museum's famous planetarium. ■

Alston & Bird City Focus:

Five Facts You Should Know About Our Raleigh Office

- The Raleigh office is home to A&B's nationally renowned biotechnology patent solicitation practice.
- The Intellectual Property practice supports patent solicitation work in the mechanical, chemical and biotechnology areas.
- Our attorneys are included in *The Best Lawyers in America* and North Carolina's Legal Elite lists.
- Our clients include BASF Corporation, Honeywell International Inc., Beiersdorf AG and Duke University.
- The city of Raleigh was ranked as the 4th Best Big City in the country by *Money Magazine's* 2006 "Best Places to Live" list.

Insight From an Interview Insider cont...

and not even diversity of ethnicity or race or anything like that. If someone has had some broad, substantive experiences in their education or career, I think that's important to us. Also, we look at factors like geographical interest and whether we think someone is sincerely interested in our firm and in our city.

How do you suggest that candidates prepare for their interviews?

Derin: I think you should learn as much as you can about the firm. I think one of the biggest things that turn interviewers off is when candidates ask questions that could have been answered by simply looking at the website. It sends a message that, if you didn't take the time to at least take a look at the website and some of our promotional materials, then maybe you're not really that interested in the firm. I encourage you to find out all that you can about the firm so you can ask informed questions, which will impress the interviewers.

How often do candidates ask uninformed questions?

Derin: It happens a lot. You'll hear candidates say, "I'm really interested in your entertainment practice." Well, had they done their research, they would know that we don't really have an entertainment practice. A question such as this rules them out as one of the people we'd seriously consider.

Do you have any additional advice for law students that are planning to go on campus and interview this upcoming season?

Derin: Find out what you want to do. As a first or second year law student, you may not know exactly what you want to do. Evaluate yourself, and take inventory of your skills and talents. This will help you find out where you think you would fit in well in terms of a practice area; and what would be interesting to you for your long-term professional development. ■

Summer Associate Timelines for a Typical Day at Alston & Bird

Maulin Shah and Angela Navarro were members of the 2007 Summer Associate Class in Alston & Bird's Charlotte office. Maulin, a second year student at University of Florida School of Law, is a returning summer associate after being selected at the Georgia State Intellectual Property Job Fair. Angela, a first year student at Georgetown University School of Law, was selected by the Charlotte Legal Diversity Clerkship Program to work at Alston & Bird this summer. Angela and Maulin invite you to experience one day with them at the firm.

Maulin Shah

Interest: Intellectual Property

8:30 a.m.

I arrive at work, check my emails and grab a quick cup of coffee.

9:00 a.m.

My mentor and I review projects in the work project database. We select a project that requires me to prepare office action responses. To get further information, I place a quick call to the assigning attorney to schedule a meeting.

12:00 p.m.

Several IP associates take me out for lunch at Fuel Pizza.

1:00 p.m.

I continue working on a previously assigned project which requires me to research IP case law and learn about patent mapping.

3:00 p.m.

It's time for me to attend the July Birthday Celebration. I can have a piece of cake in time to satisfy my afternoon sugar fix.

5:00 p.m.

After replying to emails, I head over to a nearby gym with a few associates for our daily workout. Fortunately, the firm provided me with a free gym membership to offset the effects of those lavish, free meals!

Most Exciting Aspect of My Experience:

I have had the opportunity to work on various types of IP projects and learn about patent mapping.

Angela Navarro

Interests: Global Finance & Debt Products, Corporate Transactions & Securities

8:30 a.m.

I arrive at work, charge my blackberry and check my emails.

9:00 a.m.

The firm's summer program has incorporated educational programming into its agenda. Today, I am a participant in the legal writing seminar.

12:00 p.m.

My lunch plans for today include joining some Corporate Transaction associates for lunch at a Japanese fusion restaurant called Fujo's.

1:30 p.m.

I start working on a project assignment for Global Finance. It requires that I read through a credit agreement, determine the conditions and events of default and analyze where a specific event would cause a default under the terms of the agreement.

3:15 p.m.

A Global Finance associate invites me to go for a quick Starbucks trip.

5:30 p.m.

A few summers and I carpool from the office to a firm-sponsored bowling event which supports the local Junior Achievement organization.

Most Exciting Aspect of My Experience:

When I realized that working in a law firm can be a truly wonderful experience. The people and projects were invigorating.

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