

The Power of Self-Awareness and Positive Thinking During Your Job Search

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By Dan Binstock, Esq.

As a legal recruiter, I spend my days speaking to lawyers about their job transitions and speaking to law firms about my candidates' credentials. I work in a world where grades, law school, and law firm prestige seem to reign supreme. However, there are countless situations where lawyers with good, but not great, credentials are far more successful in their job searches than those with stellar credentials. I used to believe that, in these circumstances, the lawyer with the better credentials must have had weak interpersonal skills while the lawyer with lesser credentials had strong interpersonal skills, which must have accounted for the difference. While this was true on occasion, it often was not the case. As I studied these types of situations, I realized a common characteristic among the lawyers with lesser credentials that seemed to outperform the others on job searches: They believed in themselves in an uncharacteristically strong way and were extremely positive thinkers about their abilities. Regardless of their credentials or experience, they generated these undeniable airs of self-assurance, as if they just knew they would get the jobs of their choices. And usually they did, because their self-confidence was contagious.

The goal of this article is to raise your awareness of your often unnoticed internal feelings and thinking patterns and how they may be serving or sabotaging your career interests. Specifically, this article discusses (1) why lawyers are typically not positive thinkers, (2) how particular thoughts affect our

actions and create reality (whether on a conscious or unconscious level), (3) how to tap into and rid yourself of self-defeating feelings and thoughts, and (4) how positive thinking is an extremely strong tool in helping to achieve success during your job search and throughout your career.

Why Lawyers Are Typically Not Positive Thinkers

We have all heard worn-out phrases such as "think positive" or "don't be negative." We also know that it's probably much better, for both personal and professional reasons, to go through life with a positive attitude rather than a negative one. However, during job searches, most lawyers often overlook the importance of stepping back and observing their feelings and thinking patterns and the effects they have on them. This is not a surprise, because lawyers are not usually trained to focus on their internal dialogue or positive thinking. Conversely, lawyers are trained to analyze and foresee worst-case scenarios and to protect their clients from these situations. Furthermore, by working in typically adversarial situations, lawyers are often focused on finding fault in the opposition's position or trying to minimize the weaknesses in their own positions. Lastly, most daily interactions with opposing counsel or your colleagues involve analyzing what is wrong with a particular argument, case, statute, or position. By doing this 10 hours a day, five days a week, year in and year out, it is no surprise that lawyers do not spend much time focusing on positive thinking.

Yet positive thinking is one of those things that, if given minimal attention, can make a powerful difference in your job search (not to mention your overall life). I have seen this happen many times with astounding results. In order to fully appreciate and take in this article, I ask you to temporarily remove your "lawyer

nal, the side of your brain that thinks only logically and critically.

Thoughts Are the Building Blocks of Reality

Let's get a little metaphysical here for a few minutes. At the most fundamental level, thoughts create reality. If this sounds too spiritual or fluffy, that's okay. Just stick with me, and I'll explain anyway. Let's use The Empire State Building as an example. This building started as a simple thought. John Jakob Raskob (creator of General Motors) had the idea that he wanted to build a building taller than the Chrysler Building. Eventually, his thought turned into a 102-floor reality. Take a look at other objects around you: your desk, your chair, a Diet Coke can, a painting, etc. In order for these to be created, somebody had the thought to create them and then put that thought into action. Everything that surrounds you began, at the earliest stage, as a single thought that developed into reality.

Think of your career. You did not miraculously become a lawyer by chance. At some point earlier in your life, you had the thought of being a lawyer, and you focused on that thought. As you continued to focus more on that thought, you applied to law school and were accepted. During law school, you continued to focus on being a lawyer, and you created that reality by working hard, graduating from law school, and passing the bar exam. Now imagine what would have happened if you always thought about being a doctor, not a lawyer. You would have created a completely different reality because you would not have focused on being a lawyer.

In the context of interviews, if you believe you are going to bomb an interview, you likely will because your unconscious will create the reality you focus on.

Whether you realize it or not, you will say and do things that are in congruity with your belief that you will bomb the interview. And if you believe you are going to ace an interview, chances are you will be much more impressive because your unconscious mind, once again, will create the reality you focus on and will cause you to act and speak in a manner that is congruent with your belief that you deserve the job.

How Thoughts Directly Affect Your Actions

It is estimated that humans have, on average, around 50,000 thoughts per day. However, most people do not take the time to step back and consider whether the daily 50,000-or-so thoughts are actually helping or hindering their goals. Okay, very cheesy analogy coming up. Assuming your life is like a car, your thoughts are in the driver's seat. Let's apply this to a hypothetical job-search situation.

Assume Attorney A and Attorney B both have identical credentials: They both graduated in the top 20% of their classes at top-30 law schools and have three years of corporate experience at a moderately prestigious law firm. Let's assume Attorney A and Attorney B both view the following advertisement: *Very prestigious law firm seeking a corporate associate with 2-4 years of experience. The ideal candidate will have very strong credentials and experience and must be willing to assume substantial client-management responsibilities.*

Let's also assume that both Attorney A and Attorney B fit the general requirements, but Attorney A is a positive thinker, and Attorney B is not. Their reactions (both conscious and unconscious) and responses to this ad will be vastly different. Attorney A will likely view the ad with excitement because,

although her grades were not in the top 5% of her class, she believes she did quite well, has gained good experience, and has a strong desire to take on more client-management responsibilities. In short, she sees this as a possible opportunity that she can take advantage of to step up to a better firm and gain more experience. She realizes she might get rejected, but also realizes that she certainly won't get the job without trying. Thus, Attorney A submits her resume with the hope that she will get the interview. It turns out that the firm is in dire need to add attorneys, and although there are certainly more qualified attorneys, the firm calls Attorney A in for an interview. Although the firm realizes that Attorney A is not at the top of her class and is coming from only a marginally prestigious firm, the firm is impressed with Attorney A's experience, enthusiasm, and confidence in herself, as well as her willingness to take on the new challenge. Thus, the firm extends Attorney A an offer that is 20% above her current salary.

Attorney B, on the other hand, views this ad and becomes skeptical and uncomfortable. Why? Attorney B feels that graduating in the top 20% is only okay. He remembers that C- he got during his third year and figures the firm must be looking for people in the top 5% and on law journal. He also feels that his firm is not a highly prestigious firm and he does not deserve to get a job at such a firm. Thus, rather than submit his resume and risk rejection, he decides to play it safe and not apply for the opening. *Amazingly, Attorney B may not have even been consciously aware that he had that entire self-defeating internal dialogue inside his head.* Thus, Attorney B continues at his current job, while Attorney A has taken a job at a more prestigious firm and is now making 20% more.

Although Attorney A and Attorney B both had the same credentials, it is easy to

see how their careers will begin to take vastly different paths based on their vastly different thinking patterns and approaches to neutral situations.

Truly Meaningful Positive Thinking Requires a Two-Step Process

1. You Must First Acknowledge the Negative Thoughts and Feelings

Positive thinking is not very beneficial if you do not believe the positive thoughts. Simply telling yourself, "I am relaxed and confident," if you actually feel nervous, will not change things a whole lot because you cannot trick your unconscious mind.

Thus, the first step to effectively adjusting your thinking patterns is to get in touch with how you feel when certain thoughts arise. For example, when reading a posting for an attorney position that asks for someone who is "smart and accomplished," is your initial reaction comfort or discomfort? Or when you envision yourself on an interview, what types of feelings come up: thoughts of potential success or thoughts of potential failure? Are your thoughts consumed with how to not look silly or say the wrong thing or how you can best convey all that you have to offer?

When I coach my candidates before interviews, I always ask, "When thinking about the upcoming interview, is there anything that concerns you or makes you feel uneasy? Or is there something you are hoping you are not asked?" Invariably, there are a few things that need to be discussed. Usually, after these issues are discussed, the candidate feels much more relieved-as if the concerns have been greatly reduced by merely addressing them-and much more able to focus on selling himself/herself during the interview.

If you are not quite sure whether you are having negative thoughts or feelings about an interview or potential new job, here's a good exercise. Sit down, take a few deep breaths, and ask yourself, "How do I feel about _____?" Resist the urge to focus on your thoughts. Instead, focus on what is going on inside your body. Does your breath slightly pause? Is there a slight tightening in your stomach or chest? Your body is the best indication of how you are truly feeling. If you do feel some discomfort or pause, what you should do is just allow yourself to focus on that part of your body that reacted to the question and feel what is going on for about 20 seconds or until the feeling dissipates. The reason for allowing yourself to feel this stuff is that, unless you let yourself acknowledge it, it will continue to stay harbored in your body and will manifest itself in all sorts of forms during an interview, such as fear and uncertainty. Numerous studies have shown that simply allowing yourself to feel and accept certain harbored feelings inside your body will go a long way in causing them to greatly dissipate. A good analogy is getting a shot at the doctor's office. If you flex your muscle when the needle is injected, it will get stuck and stay there. If you allow your arm to just relax and feel the momentary discomfort, the needle will be easily removed. Emotions are very similar.

Regardless of how much you may think you have developed a killer presentation as to why you are the perfect candidate for the job, if you do not believe it on a deep and internal level, a mixed message will be conveyed through very subtle means (lack of eye contact, shifting of body position, a sense of discomfort when certain questions are asked). Nothing will turn off a potential employer so much as a candidate's discomfort and uncertainty.

2. Choosing to Think Positively: A No-Brainer Cost/Benefit Analysis

You should also become aware of your thinking patterns, which are often ingrained habits that are formed over many years. Are most of your thoughts given a negative slant (e.g., how will this hurt me?) or a positive slant (e.g., how will this help me)? In doing so, realize that everyone has the choice to view a situation either positively or negatively. Viktor Frankl—a famous psychologist, Holocaust survivor, and author of the classic book *Man's Search for Meaning*—used his experience in the Holocaust to begin a famous movement that focused, in part, on choosing to see the positive in any and all experiences. Using the example of Attorney A and Attorney B above, Attorney A was more successful because she chose to view her situation in a positive light, although she could have easily fallen into the negative thinking trap that caught Attorney B.

If you are more like Attorney B and seem to focus on the negatives rather than the positives during a job search, ask yourself, "How are my negative thoughts serving my career needs/goals?" Unless your career goal is to stay where you are and not move forward, negative thoughts will completely and unilaterally undermine your career goals. On the other hand, thinking and feeling positively about yourself, your experiences, your abilities, and what you have to offer will shine through to others on many levels. Unless you are a glutton for punishment, you have absolutely nothing to lose and everything to gain by creating a positive outlook on your career.

In closing, taking the time to identify and transform your negative thoughts and feelings into positive ones is likely one of the smallest but most powerful things you can do to improve your career on many levels.

