

The Importance of Endorsements, References and Getting Others to Cheer for You

By *Harrison Barnes*

As a legal recruiter, one of the things I spent a lot of time doing was writing long, in-depth letters on behalf of my candidates. In many cases these letters would be over 10 pages long. The letters would contain discussions of the candidate's character, overflowing praise of the attorney's accomplishments and would also tell a story.

I did such long and in-depth letters because I learned, early on in my legal recruiting career, that the longer and more praiseworthy the letter was the more likely the person was to get a job. Most recruiters do not even write letters on their candidates' behalf; however, I firmly believe to this day that such letters made a huge difference in whether or not any individual candidate I worked with got hired.

The more time I spent learning about the candidate, the more I said about the candidate and the more enthusiasm I said it with, the more likely the candidate was to get hired. It always worked liked this—the better I did my job the more likely the candidate was to get hired.

If a poor legal recruiter is working on someone's behalf, the legal recruiter is going to do more harm than good. Even an "average" legal recruiter should not be recruiting in my opinion. Nevertheless, a really good legal recruiter can make a huge difference. Their enthusiasm for their candidate is contagious and their endorsement makes a huge difference in whether or not the person gets hired. I have seen a good recruiter get someone multiple offers within a few weeks after the person spent months looking for a job with no success. A good recruiter makes all of the difference.

While I know there are recruiters who would disagree with me, I think that what really makes the difference for good recruiters is their endorsement of the candidate. When someone is applying to a law firm on their own (or any employer) they cannot really toot their own horn too much—or else they will risk being disliked. Conversely, when a recruiter gets involved the recruiter can promote the person all they want without making the person look bad. In fact, the recruiter will make the person look much better than they would look on their own — and this makes a huge difference.

You would think that law firms would discount the words of an enthusiastic recruiter singing the candidate's praises; however, this does not happen. The reason this does not occur is because the law firm and people inside it are committing what is called the "fundamental attribution error." When we are observing someone's behavior, we tend to give insufficient weight to situational factors that play in shaping a person's behavior.

In 1967, two researchers, Edward Jones and Victor Harris, asked various people to assess a person's pro or anti-Castro feelings given in an essay they had written. Despite being informed that the writers had been made to write certain anti-Castro or pro-Castro arguments, the people evaluating the writing still assumed the people believed what they were writing.

We focus more on the person than the situation. In terms of me writing about how great my candidate was, the law firms were focusing on what I was saying and not the fact that I was being paid to say good things about my candidate. This is the main reason my letters had such a powerful effect—and also a reason that positive references can do so much good.

Having an advocate making your case can be a very good strategy when searching for a job. When you are trying to get a job with people you do not know, knowing someone inside the company who can sing your praises to people doing hiring can also be a very worthwhile strategy—in fact, this is likely to make your application much, much more effective that it would be otherwise.

A few years ago I was interviewing people for a position and a woman came in who was very professional. I was absolutely amazed at how professional the woman was: She spoke with poise, had great work experience, a strong educational background and seemed, in all respects, absolutely perfect for the job.

She spoke with confidence about how good she would be at the job, how detail oriented she was, what good interpersonal skills she had and how punctual and reliable she was. I was thoroughly impressed with her and as she described her skills I was smitten and wanted to make her an offer right in the interview.

However, as I spoke with her I began sensing a "hardness" about her. I got the feeling that she was hiding something dark and menacing in her past—drugs, prison, scandal...I could not tell. As I reviewed her resume, I realized that there was a five year gap since her last job. She was very elusive about what she had been doing for the past five years—and something just did not seem to add up.

When I asked her if she had any personal or business references she could provide me, she immediately clammed up and told me that she did not. She told me she could not think of anyone who would be a reference for her. I wanted to hire her but needed to get a reference to check my instinct that there might be something wrong.

A few years ago someone in our company stole from the company when he left. This was a man with a family and he was somewhat talented at his job and he made a good living. Nevertheless, when he left he stole around \$500 which was just plain strange to us. Not only did he steal the money, but he admitted it and refused to give it back. To state it mildly, I and everyone else that knew about this were a little shocked.

Over the past several years I have gotten a few phone calls from potential employers checking this guy's references. It is always uncomfortable for me and I am unsure what I am supposed to say. It is odd that someone would use me as a reference when he has stolen from me in the past—and admitted doing so. It makes very little sense at all.

Asking for references and having references is extremely important. We all need references and people to speak on our behalf. No matter how persuasive and eloquently we may speak about ourselves, what others say about us generally carries a lot of weight. It is the people we have touched (rightly or wrongly) that ultimately create our persona and the message we leave with the world. What people say about us when we are not around is often the opinion that matters the most.

Because the woman I was interviewing could not think of a single reference whatsoever, I was very reluctant to hire her. As the interview wound up, it became very uncomfortable and I wondered if she had spent the past five years in prison, drug rehab, or something along those lines. I am pretty confident that there was a "skeleton" of some sort in her closet that she did not want me to know about.

It is much easier to get a job, make friends and advance along our chosen path when we are recommended by others. An "endorsement" or recommendation goes a long way to getting doors opened and things accomplished. No matter how poised and professional you are in person, if you cannot get good endorsements from others you typically are going to have a very difficult time when it comes to finding jobs. People who are recommended by others typically have a much easier time getting jobs.

When you are interviewing, creating a resume and cover letter and trying to convey your expertise, the danger is that you are going to come across as conceited and arrogant. This is the last thing that you want when looking for a job. When you start singing your own praises you start to be unlikable as well. Most of us do not like people who toot their own horn, for example, and you never want to avoid be unlikable when looking for a job.

The best option and the best way to "brag" is to have someone else do it for you. Whenever you see a professional speaker take the stage, they most often are introduced by someone else. The person introducing them is typically reading a biography prepared by the speaker themselves. The reason speakers do this is because unless they are introduced like this they are worried that people will not pay attention to what they have to say—and they also do not have to worry about the negative implications of "tooting their own horn" to the audience.

When you are in the job market—or doing anything for that matter—do your best to always have other people sing your praises. It will make a huge difference in you getting ahead. Get others to cheer for you.

THE LESSON

In the job market or any other venue, getting others to sing your praises will make a huge difference to you as far as getting ahead. The best way to brag about your work is to get someone else to do it for you. When applying for a job, getting someone inside the company to speak well of you will vastly increase your odds of success, making your application much more effective than it would otherwise have been.

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