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TO AVOID A DOG OF A JOB, CHOOSE YOUR JOB LIKE A DOG

by Jon Lewis

As a legal recruiter with more than 12 years of experience, I am frequently asked for guidance by candidates trying to choose a new job. I also happen to be a huge dog lover, and since my affection for canines is well-known friends sometimes ask me for suggestions about selecting their new best four-legged pals. While neither of those facts alone is especially noteworthy, it might surprise you to learn that a lot of the same advice actually applies in both situations. There is a lot to be said for picking your job according to some of the same rules you should follow in picking a dog.

Chic and Popular Aren't Always Good



The little guy here is a French bulldog. Over the past few years, this breed has enjoyed a significant upsurge in attention and popularity. And not without reason — they are usually affectionate, funny, and cute dogs. However, they are also particularly prone to a variety of health problems, ranging from breathing disorders to excessive gas. If you get a Frenchie just because they are trendy and aren't aware of such potential health issues, you could wind up very

unpleasantly surprised.

In the legal job context, too, it can be a big mistake to go with the “hot” job that all your friends envy without first carefully exploring what you are really getting into. Believe it or not, there are some really bad in-house jobs out there. And there is an entertainment boutique where I've been told on several occasions the work environment is about as much fun as a flatulent Frenchie. Of course it's fine to explore jobs which are highly sought after — there may be good reasons for their popularity. But you focus on this to the exclusion of other factors at your own peril.

Temperament Matters More Than Size

Quick quiz: which of the dogs below is apt to make a better pet for an apartment dweller?



The answer is not as obvious as it might appear. Clearly, the giant Great Dane takes up a lot more physical space. Yet, in other ways, the diminutive Jack Russell can actually take up more room in your life — they are high-energy little dogs that are very active indoors and can become major bounce-off-the-wall nuisances unless they get sufficient exercise. The Great Dane, on the other hand, is usually a calm dog, more content to be a couch potato.

Similarly, temperament is often more important than size when it comes to picking a legal job. Many associates have learned the hard way that “smaller” doesn’t always mean “friendlier” when it comes to law firms. There are definitely some high strung and difficult small firms out there; contrary to popular belief, there are also some large national firms which offer relatively calm and pleasant atmospheres.

You’ve probably heard the old saying “It’s not the size of the dog in the fight but the size of the fight in the dog that counts.” Well, if you are an associate trying to choose between opportunities and lifestyle/work environment is an important consideration, remember that it’s not the size of the firm in the fight so much as the size of the fight in the firm you should worry about.

Don’t Get Too Hung Up On Pedigree



This is my own dog, Abby.

Abby is a rescued mutt, with generous helpings of border collie and pit bull, along with some beagle and shepherd. She also happens to be the best dog I have ever had, and I wouldn’t trade her for a kennel full of pure breeds.

For most people, focusing on fancy pedigree is absolutely the wrong way to pick a dog — unless you are really planning on showing and/or breeding the animal there isn’t much point in looking for canines with credentials. Chatting up your dog’s lineage at cocktail parties gets old real quick (especially for

those who have to listen to you). When it comes to dogs, the right fit for you is much more important than pedigree.

The same thing is usually true of law firms. Yes, you might impress some people if you tell them you are an associate at a Vault top 10 firm, but that thrill tends to wear thin fast. For many attorneys, a lesser-known firm can turn out to be the lovable mutt that brings real career satisfaction. I myself have placed several associates coming out of top 25 national firms into a small firm none of them had ever heard of before I first mentioned it — all were very happy with the change.

Judge the Dog, Not the Breed

When selecting a dog, general information about breeds can of course be very useful. Aggressive labs are rarer than aggressive pit bulls, for example. That being said, it is also important to remember that you can't adopt or buy a breed, but only one representative thereof. Individual dogs vary within any breed, and the temperament/behavior of the one you are bringing home matters a lot more than the abstract breed standard.

Again, the same advice applies in the context of the legal job market. Far too many of my associate candidates over the years have focused mainly on broad categories of jobs that they think might be appealing, without investigating sufficiently the specifics of the opportunity actually in front of them. It is true, for example, that in-house jobs typically offer better hours than law firm positions — if you are seeking better lifestyle it makes perfect sense to consider in-house positions. However, it is important to remember that you won't be taking the "typical" in-house job, but rather one particular position. Evaluate that position with care without relying too much on the in-house label. Otherwise, you might learn the hard way that some corporate legal departments can be as vicious to attorneys as a rabid Rottweiler.

Careful About Puppies

In my opinion puppies are usually a bad idea for inexperienced owners. Puppies are a lot of work. They will typically look to their human companions for leadership, but can become willful and difficult to handle if they sense that such leadership is lacking. They require a great deal of firm but gentle and patient training to become well-behaved dogs. In my experience, many first time dog owners are not equipped to provide the necessary guidance.

In the legal employment context, too, new operations should be approached with caution, if at all. Though it may seem attractive to get in on the ground floor at a recently opened law firm office or start-up company, such opportunities often come with less structure, training and guidance

for new attorneys. Particularly for a relatively junior associate, there is a real danger of finding yourself way over your head in such positions. It is of course important to have confidence in your abilities, but especially in these situations it is just as important to honestly assess your limitations in experience — otherwise, you might just find that you’ve bitten off more than you can chew.