

Student Life # 2: Articling Interviews

When we interviewed our students and associates to find out what information they, as students, would have liked to have seen on our website, articling week and interviews were hot topics.

We anticipated some of their questions, such as “what can I do to prepare for interviews?”. Others caught us by surprise, like, “what does the recruiting committee do to prepare for interviews?”. The purpose of this section is to answer as many of these types of questions as we can, and hopefully dispel some of the myths as to what interviewing week is all about. In tackling this, we found that there were so many questions to be answered, we had to break down the content into two sections: preparing for and attending interviews; and interview week. You’ll find the second section under the heading “Student Life # 3, Interview Week”.

Before you read on, bear in mind that this information provides only the Alexander Holburn perspective on recruiting and articling matters. While much of the information we provide is based on our experiences and common sense, other firms may have different thoughts about interviews and will follow a different process when it comes to interviewing week.

If you applied for a summer position with a firm but did not get an interview, is it worth reapplying to the same firm for articles?

Yes, it is worth reapplying. We regard the articling recruitment process as

separate from the summer student recruitment process. Often, students are not given interviews for summer student positions simply because we have too few interview times available. As the vast majority of summer students remain at the firms with which they have summered, the applicant pool is reduced and the remaining students have a better chance of obtaining an articling interview.

Those students who do not obtain an interview for a summer position also have a full school year to strengthen their applications for articles. Better grades, demonstrated community involvement, or valuable employment experience obtained in that year can make a significant difference in obtaining an articling interview.

Is it more difficult for a student who has gone to law school out of province to obtain an interview for articles in Vancouver?

No, it should not be more difficult for an “out of province” student to obtain an articling interview in Vancouver. At Alexander Holburn, we have interviewed and hired students from most of the law schools in Canada.

We do recommend that out of province students stay informed about the Vancouver recruiting process, simply because different provinces/cities conduct interviews at different times of the year. Fortunately, Canadian law schools have excellent career development officers who will be able to assist in this regard.

Where possible, we also recommend that you include with your application a guide setting out the “bell curve” with respect to your law school’s specific grading practices, especially if you believe that your school grades on a low average. We know that a “B” average does not mean the same thing at every law school in Canada. Because we receive many applications from UBC and UVIC, we understand the grading curves of these schools. However, it is not always easy for us to compare these marks with those from many of the other Canadian law schools. Such a guide would be of great assistance to us. We are also aware that law schools will change the grade averages from time to time, but the firms are not always privy to this information.

Should I schedule my interviews so that my first interviews are for my “first choice” firms? Do firms care about the timing of interviews?

Scheduling interviews has become a complicated undertaking, for both firms and students. There is no correct answer to this question. To the extent that you can have some say in your interviewing times, you may wish to interview with your “first choice” firms on the Monday or early Tuesday of interview week. However, that is not always possible, given that firms will contact you about interviews at different times and may only have certain time slots open to meet with you.

Be careful about “putting off” some firms by trying to leave too much time available on the Monday of interview

week. You may find that your priorities as to where you would like to work have changed after your interviews. You may also find that, when the dust clears and all interviews are scheduled, you have unexpected gaps in your schedule on the Monday or Tuesday, which could have been otherwise productively spent interviewing.

Also be careful about rescheduling interview times to try to meet with your “first choice” firms first. Remember that scheduling interviews is a complicated process for the firms involved and that making many changes to an already arranged schedule can be problematic.

Don’t worry too much about the timing of your interviews as an indication of your firm preferences. It is much more important to advise your “first choice” firm of your interest in them directly, either at or immediately after the interview.

What can I do to prepare for interviewing week?

Much like school, study, research, and study. Find out all you can about the firms you will be interviewing with. Read the websites to determine the areas of practice and how the firm perceives itself.

But don’t stop there! Talk to people about their impressions of the various firms in Vancouver, particularly friends from law school who have already articulated or been through interviewing week. If you have specific questions about the firms, contact someone on

that firm's student recruitment committee. At Alexander Holburn, that would be Christine York, our Director of Associates and Students. You may also wish to contact existing articling students for their input. You should also attend the events put on by your law school, such as the UBC or UVIC Wine and Cheese evenings, as the firms attend these events for the purpose of meeting students and responding to questions.

As a side note, if you are going to contact a firm directly – either through telephone, email or at the Wine & Cheese – remember that you will leave an impression upon the people that you deal with. Make it a good impression. While this should not prevent you from asking difficult questions, make sure you follow the same etiquette that you would during an interview.

Hopefully, with all of this information you will start to identify some of the similarities and differences amongst the Vancouver firms. This will give you a starting point to think of some specific questions to put to your interviewer. It is really important to come to an interview with good questions. It allows you to explore issues you find are relevant, as opposed to the interview becoming too one-sided. It shows the interviewer that you are serious about obtaining articles and have invested time in thinking about career decisions. It also gives you the opportunity to eliminate the dreaded “dead air space” in an interview, should it arise. Most interviewers are grateful to have a dialogue with articling candidates during an interview and an arsenal of

intelligent questions gives you an easy opportunity to spark conversation.

You should also think about what you will be asked during an interview. Although every interview will be different, you will find that some questions come up over and over again.

Talk to your friends who have been through the process about what they were asked. Your career development officer may also be able to provide you with insight into these types of questions and refer you to some publications that can help. One good one is “Law Firm Recruitment in Canada: Job Search Advice for Law Students and Associates” by Wendy Griesdorf (Irwin Law, 2004).

Remember that before you attend an interview, the only information the interviewer will likely have about you is what you have provided in your application. Re-read your application, including the cover letter. Think about the information you have provided and how you can distinguish yourself from other students. Make a list of qualities that set you apart. Consider how you can introduce these in the course of an interview, so that your strengths will be highlighted.

At the very least, this type of preparation should reduce your stress level so you can get a good night sleep before your interviews – also a must!

If you could give students one piece of advice about interviews, what would it be?

This is an easy question: **JUST BE YOURSELF**. You are much more likely to be relaxed in an interviewing situation when you are “being you”, which will make the entire process more enjoyable. More importantly, “being yourself” in an interview is the best way to determine whether there is a match between your career values, priorities, and goals and those of the firms with which you are interviewing. Also bear in mind that most interviewers are sophisticated practitioners with a great deal of interviewing experience. If you are trying to be someone that you are not simply to impress or to try to win a job, that is likely to come through during the interview. What your interviewer is likely to be left with is a feeling that you are being disingenuous, which is the last impression you want to make. Even worse, if you have successfully persuaded a firm into thinking you are something that you are not, you may find yourself working at a place that is not a good “fit” for you, practising a type of law that you do not enjoy.

Do not lose sight of the fact that the goal of articling interviews is to begin your legal career – not simply to get a job. You need to best equip yourself with the means to find out where you will be happy practising, long term. Remaining true to yourself is the best tool you have.

Do you have any tips for interviews in general?

Of course, when we recommend that you “just be yourself”, we know that you recognize the difference between an interview situation and simply

going out for drinks with your friends on Friday night. The former is exciting, but generally much less fun than the latter. Further, there is an interviewing etiquette, a full statement of which is beyond the intent of this section. Some of the more important points we have not already stated are:

- Wear a suit.
- Always shake hands firmly, but don’t try to rip your interviewer’s arm off.
- Look the interviewer in the eyes, but don’t stare them down.
- Try to be relaxed, but remain business-like.
- Speak confidently and directly. Try to avoid too many “ahhs”, “ehs”, “likes”, or “actuallys”.
- Try to engage in a dialogue. Interviews are much less fun for everyone involved if it is a one-way question and answer session.

Interviewers will often use the interviewing process to assess how you would relate to their clients, the key aspect of their business. Think about what you would want from a professional as a client and try to emulate that behavior in the interview.

Should I send “thank you” notes to my interviewers? What about emails?

A follow-up communication after the interview is really important -- not because we think we deserve thanks for an interview, but because it lets us know that you are interested in

working at our firm. Plain and simple, we want to hire people who want to work with us. A follow-up communication advising your interviewer of your interest in Alexander Holburn can go a long way.

The means of communication is not particularly important. Thank you notes are always well regarded, but the trick is to get them to your interviewer right away. For that reason, a quick email might be preferable. Telephone calls are fine as well, although an email can be viewed at the interviewer's convenience. Email can also be printed off and easily sent to others on the recruiting committee.

One note of caution: Proofread your thank you notes and emails. The last thing you want is to have a follow-up communication count against you.

Everyone talks about “law firm culture”. How can I find out more about this?

There are significant differences in the culture of law firms, but this can often be the most elusive thing to determine. However, the answer to this question can provide some of the most important information available to assess what your life would be like as a member of that firm.

Again, the first step in finding out about a law firm culture is to do your homework. Look at the firm's website

and promotional materials. Consider not only the content, but the visual aspects of the materials. This is the image that the firm wants to portray about itself to the outside world. What does it say to you about who the firm thinks it is?

Talk to as many people as you can. Try to talk to someone who has worked at the firm or, at least, knows someone who works there. Ask the interviewers questions about firm culture. If you have been on more than one interview, ask different people the same questions. Do you get the same answers?

Follow your intuition when it comes to assessing what it would be like to work in a firm. Look for non-verbal signs when you go for an interview. Go to the interview a few minutes early and sit in the reception area. What do the offices look like? How do people relate to one another at the firm? Do people look like they are enjoying themselves? Are the doors to the various offices open? Think to yourself, is this a place I want to spend a considerable portion of the day? The answers to some of these questions might provide you with key information about whether a firm would be suited to your personality.

To find out more about what your life might be like at Alexander Holburn, please visit our website at www.ahbl.ca.