

# Job Search Techniques For Shy Attorneys

By Laurence J. Stybel and Maryanne Peabody

Most of the authoritative professional job search books focus on the value of networking as the key technique in securing new work or developing one's own practice. An implicit assumption behind networking-oriented approaches is that the reader is essentially an outgoing individual, and will find networking an acceptable procedure.

But what techniques for job searching are appropriate for the attorney who would rather eat the working end of a broom than go out and aggressively meet new people? In other words, what job search approaches make sense for shy attorneys.

Some definitions might first be in order. According to Dr. Philip Zimbardo, director of the Stanford University Shyness Clinic, shyness is defined as a "keen sense of being rejected...a readiness of avoiding people and situations that hold the potential for criticism." Based on various surveys of the U.S. population, it is estimated that approximately 40 percent of adults would endorse the proposition, "I consider myself a shy person." It is not generally known if shyness is a genetic predisposition or a learned response. Evidence of consistent cultural differences does exist, however. People from Japan have the highest recorded levels of expressed shyness, whereas people from Israel have the lowest.

Shy people range on a behavioral continuum. At one end of the continuum would be "social phobics." These people have a debilitating psychiatric problem whose work and personal relationships are crippled by an inability to move beyond a relatively narrow zone of social comfort. In the middle of the continuum would be the "chronically shy." These people tend to respond with shyness, regardless of the social situation. Towards the end of the continuum would be the "situationally shy."

## Different Orientations

Most people who are shy are actually "situationally" shy, although many of these situational people actually may misperceive themselves as chronically shy. According to Dr. Zimbardo, shy people tend to think differently than their non-shy counterparts. Shy people tend to overutilize generalization as a way of organizing



the world. At the same time, they have a tendency to underutilize situational logic. Examples of the two types of logic patterns would be:

Two-year-old Jennifer goes with mother to visit one of mother's friends. Jennifer is hugging her mother's skirts and avoiding eye contact with the friend. "I'm sorry but Jennifer is shy," would be a generalized explanation of the behavior. "I'm sorry but Jennifer tends to be shy when first meeting strangers. I'm sure she will act differently once she gets to know you," would be an example of situational logic.

Ten-year-old Jimmy is practicing hitting a baseball, when he accidentally shatters the picture window of the living room. "I'm angry and upset at you...you are a big disappointment to me," would be an example of generalized logic. "I'm angry and upset that you weren't careful about where you were hitting the ball," would be an example of situational logic.

## Generalization Logic In The Law

As a pattern of thought, generalization is very helpful to attorneys as it allows for the application of legal theories from one area to new areas. Developing a legal defense based on a new application of existing judicial interpretation is clearly an area where generalization logic has high value.

Any one pattern of logic, however, can become dysfunctional when over-employed.

A common example of how excessive generalization logic is used in medium to large law firms would be the following:

A junior associate submits a clearly inferior brief. Situational logic would lead the partner to be sensitive to those non-legal circumstances (such as poor health, death of a parent or break-up of an important relationship) to which the inferior work could have been attributed. Generalization logic would accept the inferior work as primary evidence to support the ultimate conclusion that the associate was not competent enough to remain with the firm. Extraneous but temporary circumstances which might have contributed to the poor performance might be noted in passing, but not given much weight.

Some law firms have associate performance appraisal programs which summarize the various perceptions of partners. An associate with a temporary personal problem who must work for several shy partners might find himself in more trouble than if that same associate worked for non-shy partners.

In other words, shy people will have a tendency to employ generalization logic to artificially and sometimes unfairly pigeon-hole others. But in doing so, they are not discriminatory. What they do to others, they also do to themselves. Many shy people would thus interpret their shy responses to particular social situations as evidence that

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[Note: Laurence J. Stybel, Ed.D. and Maryanne Peabody are founders of Stybel, Peabody & Associates, Inc., with offices in Boston and Wellesley. The above article was adapted from a speech given by Dr. Stybel and Ms. Peabody at Boston University.]

