Employer Outreach Best Practices Guide

A Nuts-and-Bolts Guide from the NALP CSO Employer Outreach Section

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Introduction

As the legal recruiting market continues to shift, employer outreach has become increasingly vital to law school career services offices. Fewer permanent offers are coming from summer experiences and on-campus interviews. Given this shifting reality, it is critical for law schools to become proficient at developing employer relationships. These relationships will lead to more formal and informal recruiting and will also create a network of professionals that can help students navigate law school and the career development process.

In addition, by building and maintaining a large network of employers, the career services office is better able to keep a pulse on employment trends. This information is invaluable in allowing us to craft our programs to maximize student employability and to share this information with faculty as they explore curricular needs in a changing profession.

Although some law schools have dedicated staff time and resources to employer outreach, most have not. For most law school career services offices, employer outreach is a new concept requiring a significant shift in the allocation of staff time and budgets.

To assist law schools in navigating this important transition, NALP created a Section to identify employer outreach best practices. This report is the first publication of this Section and is intended to give offices the nuts and bolts of employer outreach so that they can integrate it into their strategic planning. The Section will update this report periodically with new recommendations and results of member surveys.

Section 1
Assign Employer Outreach to Staff
Case Study: Santa Clara

Staff members in a law school career services office carry multiple responsibilities. We are asked to provide our students with programming to prepare them for the job search and with networking opportunities to meet employers; organize on-campus interviews and market our job boards; and meet with what seems like an ever increasing number of students and alumni in personal career counseling sessions. With so many demands on career services professionals it is easy to let something fall between the cracks, particularly if there is no immediate deadline for completing that project.

At Santa Clara, employer outreach is the responsibility that continually seems to get shortchanged. Each of our individual staff members will tell you how vitally important it is, yet finding the time to build and maintain a network can be tough. The danger is that we will start providing our students with great advice about
their own networks without following that same advice ourselves. In other words, we want them to do what we say, but not what we do.

If you have a large staff, you may be fortunate enough to have someone who is specifically tasked with employer outreach as part of their job description. For instance, I have met a few NALP colleagues who were hired specifically for this purpose and they dedicate either a majority of their time or all of their time to this activity. On the other hand, some of our NALP colleagues work in very small or solo career services offices. If you are the only career services staff member, then you know exactly who will be conducting employer outreach — and doing everything else. However, most of us work in offices with a mid-size staff with everyone sharing in multiple responsibilities. The Santa Clara office falls in this category and we have experimented with varying models of assigning employer outreach activities to staff members. The following is advice based on our own experience at Santa Clara.

Model #1 — Everyone has responsibility for employer outreach. For a period of time we assumed that everyone in the office was responsible for employer outreach. We had lively staff meetings where we enthusiastically decided that we did indeed need to do employer outreach. We were all in alignment on this issue. We even got so far as identifying a list of target employers to visit and stay in contact with. However, since we were all carrying several other responsibilities and with no one leading the charge on this particular activity, our lofty aspirations did not get implemented.

Model #2 — One person does the employer outreach. After realizing that our employer outreach efforts were languishing because everyone and no one had responsibility for them, I decided as the head of the office to be in charge of them. I planned to take one day out of the office per week to meet with employers. I even determined that when students were taking finals and at the beginning of summer, I could get out of the office twice per week. Once again, I enthusiastically drafted a list of target employers and looked forward to lunches out of the office, attending multiple networking events and getting to know alumni and friends of the university better. Things started off well. I got a few meetings scheduled, which required that I travel throughout the San Francisco Bay Area which is a real treat if you are not familiar with this corner of the world. I enthusiastically embarked on this new adventure. As before, I experienced several challenges that ultimately made me realize that this model was not sustainable for me.

I found that spending an entire day away from campus was challenging. During the school year it necessitated rescheduling multiple meetings with other law school administrators and university employees who all had busy schedules as well. As a result, my school year calendar went from being action packed to out of control. I was not able to meet with as many students as previously and as a result was not acquainted with as many of them. Because I spent the bulk of
every day in meetings, my email inbox also started to look like an untamed monster. Additionally, while I met a number of employers, other staff members did not have that opportunity. As a result, when I was contacted by an employer with whom I had been networking with an employment opportunity, my personal interactions and knowledge of the student body was more limited. When I shared employer requests with other staff members, they needed a lot of information to understand the employer’s culture, environment, and needs.

**Model #3 — All staff members share in employer outreach activities with one staff member leading this effort.** This model leverages the fact that all staff members have existing employer relationships. By allowing staff members to maintain these relationships employers feel more connected to the law school and more comfortable with their contact. By effectively skipping the first step in the employer relationship development process your office can develop productive relationships more quickly.

This model also allows a distribution of the employer outreach workload. By allowing staff to share the responsibility you may find that you are able to maintain a greater number of employer relationships.

Although all staff members share responsibility in this model, the lead person has an important role in developing the employer outreach strategy. This lead person must coordinate the other members’ efforts to assure that they intentionally focus on employers that match the goals of the student body. This is particularly important in newer law schools without long-standing recruiting relationships.

**Model #4 — One person exclusively focused on employer outreach with little or no student contact.** This model is gaining momentum in law schools. While some law schools, particularly in the Northeast, have had employer outreach people here and there — it seems that with the downfall of the economy this role has become widely popular. This model makes sense because often the skill set for counselors is quite different than the skill set for employer outreach people. The employer outreach person has the sole duty to create and maintain employer relationships. Most do not counsel students or do so only in limited cases. This person is supposed to be out of the office half of the time meeting with employers face to face. For schools with a more national breadth, the employer outreach person travels for appointments. The employer outreach person has the responsibility to interface with the counselors to give them the intelligence about the employers and markets that they need for their student counseling.

**Section 2**

**Realistic Assessment of School’s Strengths from Employer Perspective**

Why should I recruit students from your school? During the initial conversation with new employer contacts it’s important to recognize that this is their primary
question. Given the current market, employers have their choice of law schools from which to recruit. In addition, most already have existing formal or informal relationships with other law schools. Given this reality, it’s critical that your school be able to verbalize the reasons that an employer should work with you.

An important area to consider is curricular areas of strength. Identifying the areas in which your school is viewed as a leader is tremendously important. Whether it is a clinic, a specialty area, or an individual faculty member known as a substantive area thought leader, a reputation in a substantive area of the law can go a long way in opening employer doors. This can also guide you in identifying aspirant employers by allowing you to develop relationships with employers that are hiring graduates with training in those areas.

Another opportunity exists if your professional development programs are strong in certain areas. For example, if your law school trains outstanding litigators, that will open the door to employers valuing that skill set. Alternatively, if you are able to demonstrate a strong writing curriculum you will open other doors.

Let’s not forget the elephant in the room: school ranking. For many firms school ranking is still an important part of the recruiting equation. If you are fortunate enough to work for a highly ranked school, you will have access to employers that other schools may have more difficulty gaining.

Finally, it is important to consider less tangible factors that impact hiring. For example, what is the general demeanor of your student body? Are they competitive and focused? Are they friendly, collaborative young professionals? Are they leaders in their community? The personality of your student body will match with some employers better than others and should be considered as you identify strengths.

Section 3
Assessing Students’ Goals

When students begin law school, they may know very little about the types of legal or law-related jobs and specialties that are available. Initially it is important for students to obtain some kind of practical legal experience during their 1L summer, but as they get closer to graduation they should focus their career development efforts on areas that they are interested in and qualified for — and where they have opportunities. However, before students even begin any type of job search, they need to engage in some self-assessment, which will help them make more informed career choices.

The self-assessment students do should drive your employer outreach. Assess your student population for geographic factors. Many legal employers want to hire people who have “ties to the area.” Many law students and graduates find that their opportunities for employment are greatest in the geographic area where
they are from and where many of their family members may live. Law firms, large and small, want to bring in new attorneys who could potentially help to develop business. An attorney is much more likely to be able to do this if he or she is actually from the area where the firm is located. So where are your students from and where do they want to be? Finally, if a law student has a geographic preference area for any reason, the sooner the student begins working in that geographic area, the better. Students attending a law school that is not in their geographic preference area should be encouraged to spend their 1L and 2L summers working in the preferred area.

Then assess your student population for practice area preferences. Often the admissions office has already assessed the first-year class for this preference. While practice preferences change during the course of law school, the admissions survey is oftentimes a good jump-off point. You may also target employers based on popularity of courses and student groups at your law school. For example, if the student group interested in tax sees a sharp increase in membership, chances are more students will be looking for those types of positions.

Polling counselors in your office may also be a good way to see trends related to students’ desires. Counselors may say, for example, “Yes, I have been asked for information about securities much more this year than in previous years.”

As your office helps students identify their practice and geographic preferences, a profile will develop that will help direct your employer outreach efforts.

**Section 4**

**Identify Current Employer Relationships to Further Develop and Strengthen**

The key to identifying existing employer relationships for further development is to collect and analyze activity data to realistically assess which employers are engaged with the law school. The easiest place to start is to list which employers have actually hired students and recent graduates in the last two to three years. Assuming that the hires worked out, you can be relatively certain that these employers are good matches for your students and have a higher likelihood of hiring future students. This list will include organizations that have conducted on-campus interviews and resume collects and posted positions with your office. It will also include employers who hired students and graduates directly without the assistance of the career services office. You can gather these names by analyzing your summer and graduate employment surveys.

In addition to identifying employers who have hired from your school, look for employers who have engaged with the law school in other ways. Who regularly speaks in classes or to student groups? Who are your go-to people when you have questions about hiring trends? Who are your adjuncts and where do they work? Adjuncts can be particularly helpful because they have already shown an
interest in the school by accepting a teaching position. Their firms or offices may want to explore having students work as interns, externs, law clerks, or even entry-level attorneys, especially after the adjuncts have the opportunity to see students in action in the classroom. Even adjunct professors who are not in a position to work with a student or new graduate may have excellent ideas for additional contacts that can be made by career services and may even be willing to make introductions to other attorneys or judges.

Think about those attorneys who are always around the law school. Their higher level of engagement is a good sign that they will hire when the need arises. Maintaining these relationships is a long-term investment in future hires.

**Section 5**

**Identify Aspirant Employers**

How do we identify aspirant employers? That is, how do we find employers who, having not done so before, will hire our students for summer and permanent positions, attend/participate in programmed events, become mentors, and share their hard-earned wisdom with our students?

Three important steps were discussed earlier in sections three, four, and five. As was discussed in some detail, you first have to understand your school’s strengths and your students’ goals. This data allows you to develop a profile that you can then seek to match to employer needs. For example, if your school has a strong reputation in training litigators and many of your students want to practice business law, then part of your focus will likely be with medium to large firms serving corporate clients. If you have a group of students who want to practice family law in the local market, then you may focus part of your energy on small firms within 30 miles of your school.

The third step in identifying aspirant employers is to look at your current employer relationships. Once you identify who currently hires your students you can start to look for similar employers. For example, if a number of your graduates have been successful in firms serving the professional association community in Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC, then you should look for additional firms serving this large professional community. Similarly, if your students have been successful in several District Attorneys’ offices near your school you may consider developing relationships with other D.A. offices in your state.

Now that you know the type of organizations you want to develop relationships with, how do you go about identifying specific firms? The answer involves research and networking. While no “list” can be all-inclusive, here are some places to start:

- Research firms using Martindale Hubbell
- Review articles about firms in legal periodicals
• Search your alumni database for alumni in firms or corporations
• Network at local and state bar association events and ask members
• Co-host events with bar associations and firms with common missions
• Attend CLE seminars that attract target firms

Section 6
Engage Employers at Multiple Levels

Once you have identified your target employers, the next step is engaging them in the life of the law school. Think of it as a courtship. In the beginning employers may be hesitant to commit to a recruiting relationship or may not have an immediate need. Instead of passing them off and hoping they have a need later, you should look for other ways to engage them with your school. By doing so, you greatly enhance the likelihood that they will recruit with you when they do have an opening.

Primary Engagement Opportunities
Primary employer engagement takes place through career services and academic programs. In addition to posting internships, externships, clerkships, and associate positions you can also invite them to serve on employer panels. Employers can be introduced to student groups with similar interest areas and are excellent at assisting with mock interviews. Employers and, in particular, judges, may be asked to serve as judges in moot court competitions. Finally, many practicing attorneys are willing to connect with students for informational interviews over lunch or coffee.

Many schools have had tremendous success with mentoring programs. Elon University School of Law has a Preceptor Program that pairs local practicing attorneys with every 1L. Preceptors meet with students off campus to discuss their goals and offer advice. Students shadow preceptors in their offices and in court. In addition, preceptors attend class with students to learn more about their academic experience. Preceptors have become an integral part of the law school and ultimately assist students in their job search and hire graduates. Alumni in particular can be engaged in the above ways and have a natural affinity for the law school.

Engaging employers in the academic life of the school can have pay-offs for students, employers, faculty, and the career services office. Attorneys from target employers can serve on employer panels and presentations in classes or serve on clinic advisory boards. Also, introducing faculty members to attorneys in practice areas they teach is a good way to help them build their own professional networks. The same holds true for other deans and administrators.

In addition to internal connections, employers can assist career services through external connections. For example, an attorney may be willing to refer you to other employers in their network. If they work for a large firm, corporation, or
government agency, they may also be willing to refer you to other offices or departments within their organization that could hire students or alumni.

**Secondary Engagement Opportunities**
In addition to the more direct primary engagement opportunities above, there are secondary engagement opportunities. A positive working relationship with your advancement or development office can be mutually beneficial as both are focused on building external relationships. Since advancement often plays a role in selecting advisory board members, they may be able to locate board spots for your employer contacts. Sitting on the board of a law school creates a presumption that the employer will hire your students and graduates — or at least pressure to do so. In addition, some employers have philanthropic goals that can be met through a relationship with the law school.

Another opportunity to connect with employers is to tie them into your community network. Attorneys are often very active in community leadership and may be actively looking to serve on economic development boards, nonprofit boards, and other community groups. By helping attorneys identify these opportunities you build goodwill with them that will often lead to more engagement with the school. In addition to your community network, you may find yourself referring employers to another school. This may seem counterintuitive, but if an employer needs to hire someone with a specialty that your school does not teach, then help them find a school that does. They were not going to hire one of your students anyway and at least this way the employer recognizes that you are looking out for their best interests and will likely come back with future opportunities.

Finally, there is an opportunity to co-publish and co-present with employers through professional associations. Attorneys and law firms are always looking to build their brand and be recognized as content area experts. Watch for opportunities to submit joint conference presentation proposals or co-author articles in professional publications. This gets both the attorney and the school in front of other professionals and helps build recognition within the legal community.

**Section 7**
**Maintain Employer Relationships**

Once you have created an electronic database of your employers and contacts, it becomes easier to manage the upkeep of those relationships. You must actually schedule the next contact as you are speaking to the person in real time. If you had a face to face meeting today, you need to schedule the form, content, and date that your next contact will take place. Sometimes opportunities arise outside of what you have scheduled and you need to constantly adjust and re-adjust your strategic contacts with an employer.
Annual contact via phone and email: After the first face to face meeting (and hopefully a job listing) you need to maintain the contact in the future. There is not always a reason to reach out to an employer for a face to face meeting each year. However, it is paramount that you maintain the contact. Sometimes a quick checking-in email at the same time each year is enough. Sometimes a phone call simply telling them about something happening at the law school or just checking in is enough. You need to make contact with an employer at least annually. Every two to three years you need to try to have a new face to face meeting to maintain the relationship. If the contact person changes at a given employer, always try to meet with the new person face to face — even if you have recently met with the employer. You always want your point of contact to have met you. It is much harder to say no to someone that you know.

Conratulation emails if the firm or an alumnus at the firm is noted in the press: Make it a point to read all of your local, state, and national legal periodicals. Over time it becomes easy to pick out the employers you work with (or want to work with) and this makes it easy to comment on these mentions in the press. It is especially important to reach out if you see that one of your alumni writes an article. It goes a long way toward a long-term relationship when you send an email simply saying, “Nice press today (or great article)! Congratulations! Hope to speak to you soon.” You will nearly always get a reply even if it is just a “thanks”. They will remember you as the person at the law school who is watching out for them.

Tickler emails when it is time for a firm to list opportunities: When an employer regularly lists, say, a summer associate position with your law school, you should send them a tickler email reminding them to do so. It tells them you are interested in working with them and it helps them remember the appropriate time to list their opportunities. Plus, this is service that you render to the firm by way of a reminder. These can be form emails blind copied to many employers just as long as it is personally from you and the responses go to your personal email.

Invitations to events at the law school: There are many effective ways to get employers involved in the fabric of the law school life. First, you can invite representatives of employers to be speakers at programs at the law school. Asking someone to be a speaker at the law school is a feather in their cap and engages them in the law school and its students — a good thing all around. Second, invite employers or potential employers to events that might be of interest to them held at the law school. If your employer is Boeing and there is a symposium at your law school involving the aviation industry, invite them! Look through your law school events monthly and invite the appropriate people to attend the right events.

Tailoring relationships based on the type of employer: All of the above activity needs to be the right activity for the right employer. If at your face to face
meeting the employer tells you that they only hire attorneys with more than five years of experience, don’t make the mistake of asking them each semester if they want interns. Chances are the employer will think that you have not listened to them. Some employers need to hear from you each semester (fall, spring, and summer) and some need to hear from you every few years. It is up to you to craft the relationship that makes sense for you and the employer and this may take trial and error. However, you may find that it works simply to ask the employer, “When should I contact you?”

**Conclusion**

Employer outreach should be a strategic part of every career services office. Factors such as staff size, budget, ranking, and location are just a few of the variables that impact how this important function is carried out. We hope this guide has given you valuable insights as you build or grow your employer outreach efforts.

This guide is the first in a series of documents produced by the NALP Employer Outreach Section.