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How to Find an Excellent Lawyer

Though there are lots of ways to help yourself when it comes to the law, sometimes you may need a lawyer. This article will help you find a good one.

When you have a legal problem, it should go almost without saying that you need lots of legal information. Lawyers, of course, are prime sources of this information, but if you bought all the needed information at their rates - - \$150 to \$250 an hour -- you'd quickly empty your bank account. Fortunately, there are a number of efficient ways you can acquire a good working knowledge of the legal principles and procedures necessary to deal with any common legal problem.

But if your legal problem is complex or involves lots of money, you might not want to attempt to handle the entire matter without a lawyer. In part, this is because lawyers do more than dispense legal information. They also offer strategic advice and apply sophisticated technical skills to legal problems. How frequently you'll need professional help is hard to say. It depends on the nature of your problem, whether your case is contested, how much is at stake and whether your opponent has an attorney. Often you'll conclude that your challenge isn't to avoid lawyers altogether but rather to use them on a cost-effective basis. Ideally, you should find a lawyer who's willing to both serve as a legal coach to help you educate yourself to the maximum extent possible and then, if necessary, take over as your formal legal counsel.

In working with a lawyer, remember that you're the boss. A lawyer, of course, has specialized training, knowledge, skill and experience in dealing with legal matters. But that's no reason for you to give up all control over legal decision-making. Because you almost surely can't afford all the legal services that you'd benefit from, you need to set priorities. When thinking about a legal problem, ask yourself:

"Can I do this myself?"

"Can I do this myself with some help from a lawyer?"

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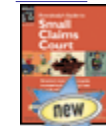
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"Should I simply put this in my lawyer's hands?"

If you decide you do, in fact, need a lawyer's help, here are some tips on finding a good one.

How to Find the Right Lawyer

Locating a good lawyer who can efficiently help with your particular problem may not be as easy as you think. The fact is that most lawyers specialize, and even a so-called "general practitioner" may not know that much about the particular area of your concern. For example, of the almost one million lawyers in America today, probably fewer than 50,000 possess sufficient training and experience in small business law to be of real help to an aspiring entrepreneur.

1. Compile a List of Prospects

Don't expect to locate a good lawyer by simply looking in the phone book, consulting a law directory or reading an advertisement. There's not enough information in these sources to help you make a valid judgment. Almost as useless are lawyer referral services operated by bar associations. Generally, these services make little attempt to evaluate a lawyer's skill and experience. They simply supply the names of lawyers who have listed with the service, often accepting the lawyer's own word for what types of skills he or she has.

A better approach is to talk to people in your community who have experienced the same problem you face -- for example, a women's group about your claim of sexual harassment. Ask them who their lawyers were and what they think of them. If you talk to half a dozen people who have had a similar legal problem, chances are you'll come away with several good leads.

People who provide services to key players in the legal area you are interested in may also be able to help you identify lawyers you should consider. For example, if you are interested in small business law, speak to your banker, accountant, insurance agent and real estate broker. These people come into frequent contact with lawyers who represent business clients and are in a position to make informed judgments.

In most specialized areas -- software design, obtaining a liquor license for a restaurant, or opening a plant nursery - it can pay to work with a lawyer who already knows the field. That way you can take advantage of the fact that the lawyer is already far up the learning curve. A specialist

may even have experience with the exact type of legal problem you face -- for example, a lawyer may have special expertise in zoning law, fighting employment discrimination cases or patenting software. Sometimes specialists charge a little more, but if their specialized information is truly valuable, it can be money well spent.

Here are a few other sources you can turn to for possible candidates in your search for a lawyer:

- The director of your state or local chamber of commerce may be a good source of business lawyers.
- A law librarian can help identify authors in your state who have written books or articles on a particular subject -- for example, construction law.
- The director of a nonprofit group interested in the subject matter that underlies your lawsuit is sure to know lawyers who work in that area. For example, if your dispute involves trying to stop a major new subdivision, it would make sense to an environmental group committed to fighting urban sprawl.
- A women's or men's support group will probably have a list of well-regarded family and divorce lawyers.

Once you have the names of several lawyers, a good source of more information about them is the Martindale-Hubbell Law Directory, online at <http://www.martindale.com>. This resource contains biographical sketches of most practicing lawyers and information about their experience, specialties, education and the professional organizations they belong to. Many firms also list their major clients in the directory -- an excellent indication of the types of practice the firm is engaged in. In addition, almost every lawyer listed in the directory, whether or not he or she purchased space for a biographical sketch, is rated "AV," "BV" or "CV." These ratings come from confidential opinions that Martindale-Hubbell solicits from lawyers and judges. The first letter is for "Legal Ability," which is rated as follows:

"A" -- Very High to Preeminent

"B" -- High to Very High

"C" -- Fair to High

The "V" part stands for "Very High General Recommendation," meaning that the rated lawyer adheres to professional standards of conduct and ethics. But it's practically meaningless because lawyers who don't qualify for it aren't rated at all.

(Martindale-Hubbell prudently cautions that the absence of a rating shouldn't be construed as a reflection on the lawyer; some lawyers ask that their rating not be published, and there may be other reasons for the absence of a rating.)

Although far from perfect, the rating system works reasonably well. Don't make it your sole criterion for deciding on a potential lawyer, but you can be reasonably confident that a lawyer who gets high marks from other clients and an "AV" rating from Martindale-Hubbell knows what he or she is doing.

2. Shop Around

When you get the names of several good prospects, the next step is to talk to each personally. If you outline your needs in advance, many lawyers will be willing to meet to you for a half-hour or so at no charge so that you can size them up and make an informed decision.

Pay particular attention to the personal chemistry between you and your lawyer. No matter how experienced and well-recommended a lawyer is, if you feel uncomfortable with that person during your first meeting or two, you may never achieve an ideal lawyer-client relationship. Trust your instincts and seek a lawyer whose personality is compatible with your own. Look also for experience, personal rapport and accessibility. Some of these characteristics will be apparent almost immediately. Others may take longer to discover. So even after you've hired a lawyer who seems right for you, keep open the possibility that you may have to make a change later.

Ask all prospective lawyers how you will be able to contact them and how long it will take them to return your communications. And don't assume that because the lawyer seems friendly and easy to talk to that it's okay to overlook this step. Unfortunately, the complaint logs of all lawyer regulatory groups indicate that many lawyers are terrible communicators. If every time you have a problem there's a delay of several days before you can talk to your lawyer on the phone or get an appointment, you'll lose precious time, not to mention sleep. And almost nothing is more aggravating to a client than to leave a legal project in a lawyer's hands and then have weeks or even months go by without anything happening. You want a lawyer who

will work hard on your behalf and follow through promptly on all assignments.

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