

ECONOMIES UNTO OURSELVES: A Pragmatic Take On Recruiting During Down Times

By Raphael Franze, Esq.

“So many things I would have done, but clouds got in my way”

—Joni Mitchell, Both Sides Now

This past March, I had the pleasure of sharing a Zoom call with my fellow NALSC members on the topic of law firm associate recruiting. Two months removed from the start of the new presidential administration, there was a universal understanding among those on the call that associate recruiting was in a stagnant place, much as the national economy had been reported to be.

As the conversation homed in on corporate associate recruiting, the exclusive domain and long-term focus of my recruiting practice, I shared my own professional take and the recent victories that I had placing young talent in what my colleagues had concluded was a particularly (and negatively) affected space. When asked what I’d attribute my relative success to, I really had little to share about the then-current state of corporate legal practice. Instead, I offered up a philosophical shift in my thinking that has served me well irrespective of macroeconomic sentiments: that, as recruiters, we are economies unto ourselves.

For many years, well into my recruiting career, nothing got me more anxious and off my game quite like news of an economy in trouble. Be it the Great Recession of the late aughts, the Covid-19 Recession of 2020, or all the crises, crashes, and selloffs occurring throughout, reporting on such events served to distract me more than I realized in the moment. It was as though an ominous cloud had hung over my workday for weeks and even months on end, serving no other purpose than to disincentivize me from my best efforts.

Only after taking measures in recent years to minimize and isolate my media consumption did I begin to appreciate the perils of up-to-the-minute news on my productivity, not to mention my overall psyche. I’ve since learned to better understand my own reactions, both rational and irrational, to reporting on the macroeconomy and its impact on the interconnected microeconomy that is the legal industry. In time, I’ve grown to better compartmentalize these factors so as not to affect my own professional best practices and the optimal personal behaviors that support them.

The following are my top four takeaways from these experiences:

1. Put the economy in proper perspective

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Instead of worrying about the economy and perceiving it as a dark cloud that casts a long shadow over one’s work, view it instead as a measure of delayed gratification. Whereas a recruiter’s best efforts in a good economy can literally pay off in three to six months, be reminded that best efforts in a down economy are still going to pay off (albeit in nine to 18 months) instead of being all for naught.

I believe this approach is one that a recruiter can readily adapt to, given that delayed gratification already is a key part of the job description.

2. Focus on the signal and remove the noise

In the context of media, “signal” and “noise” respectively refer to the authentic and informative content that we seek as opposed to the misleading and low-quality content and subjective elements that distract from it. With social media proliferating noise over signal, it is increasingly incumbent on the consumer of media to remain mindful of what exactly they are consuming.

Of course, heightened critical thinking skills go a long way in distinguishing signal from noise but the deluge of content in today’s media environment has a way of affecting mental and emotional fortitude. For me, abstaining from certain forms of media for weeks and even months at a time has proven very helpful in returning me to a more objective and less affected state. Also, consistently “educating” the algorithms that formulate my feeds (including those in LinkedIn and YouTube) by tagging undesirable content, adjusting default settings and blocking certain parties has made for a more intentional social media environment.

3. Go all in on the key performance metrics that you can control

Interviews and offers can be harder to come by in a down economy where fewer employers are looking to add to their ranks. Despite a recruiter’s best efforts, getting candidates through the latter stages of the recruiting process can seem akin to running waist-deep in mud. Alternatively, prioritize early stage recruiting activities like new prospect cold-calling, existing candidate follow-up correspondence, social media marketing efforts, and other activities that will foster familiarity and greatly enhance your candidate pool for when activity on the employer side picks up.

4. Optimize personal behaviors

In a good economy, a recruiter can do quite well in spite of themselves. Successes may often lead to a decline in discipline that can get reinforced so long as demand for talent remains high. Once that demand diminishes, a new reality sets in and the approaches that can serve a recruiter just fine in a good economy just aren’t cutting it in a down one. At this point, stepping back and reassessing one’s approach is vital.

For me, this reassessment often starts with revisiting personal disciplines that may have tapered off. Taking the time to get my sleep hygiene, nutrition, fitness, and overall habits back on track often is the right starting place to get my physical, mental, and emotional health back where it needs to be to bring the right energy to my professional life and to better

identify opportunities during challenging economic times.

In summary, a recruiter's success during poor economic times has so much more to do with preserving and protecting one's psyche than it does during prosperous ones. In taking the approach of being economies unto ourselves, recruiters can assume more control over their outcomes as they better navigate whatever landscape in which they find themselves.

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