

Kluwer Arbitration Blog

Anti-Arbitration: Get a job, kid!

Michael McIlwrath (MDisputes) · Sunday, February 12th, 2012

✖ This is the time of year when law students and young lawyers begin to apply for their summer internships or jobs in international dispute resolution. Many – probably most – will carefully draft their *curriculum vitae* to show their serious commitment to relevant academic studies, experience in international disputes or with law firms, and participation in recently completed international competitions (mock mediation and arbitrations, and moot courts).

This is, of course, very important in order for their CV's to be given serious attention. It is the document that will open the door to interviews, and employers will not consider applicants who do not have the right professional background, skills, or interests.

But, in having read thousands of CV's over the years, I have found that those that remain at the top of my desktop pile, and prompt calls for interviews, tend to convey qualities of something more in the applicant: that they will be a good cultural fit for this kind of position, will have a passion for what we do, and that they will be enjoyable to work with.

It's not easy to get all this across on a single page document, especially when most of it must cover the considerable time spent developing relevant skills and experiences in international dispute resolution. Yet a few applicants manage to do this. How?

Thinking back on the people we've hired or retained for internships over the past several years, what I recall of their CV's – what grabbed and kept attention – was how they boldly and proudly described some element of their lives or past accomplishments.

For example, in the summer of 2011 we received CV's from two interns that included the following information:

“Was listed in Guinness book of records for most books published by a 12 year-old.”

“Wrote, directed, and acted in one-woman play while at university.”

These short lines, included on the bottom half of each CV, had an effect. They showed the candidates as rounded human beings, already leading interesting lives. You could tell they did things with a passion, set high goals for themselves, were undeterred by obstacles, and would probably be enjoyable to work with. We hired both. Who wouldn't want to work with the former 12-year old novelist, or the one-woman production?

International dispute resolution is an unusual area, unlike anything else in the practice of commercial law, which I can say without being accused of hyperbole. No case is like the last one, in almost any way. The countries will be different, as will the legal and factual issues and the people involved. Even when there's an agreed formal process, arbitration, you have to be ready to consider negotiation or mediation as well. And arbitral procedure itself is hardly a straightjacket; it changes depending on place, parties, and arbitrators. You learn as you go.

Employers want to hire people who will be successful. For international dispute resolution, those who flourish are those who can adapt to circumstances that could not have been predicted at the time when they were hired, and who are not afraid of taking on challenges they were never taught in school to expect.

I still remember lines from the CV's of those we have hired over the past dozen years and that helped convey the candidate might have the right stuff.

“Was a muffin man in New Zealand”, included in the prior work experience section of the CV submitted by a German lawyer at a well-regarded international law firm in Brussels. (Hired for full time position, where he is still flourishing.)

“Former Army captain and one of seven women in combat unit that invaded Baghdad.” (Hired for summer position, during which I asked if she had ever prepared a Powerpoint presentation. I'm still smarting from the answer: “yes, in a Humvee, while under fire.” She is now a partner at a law firm in Washington DC.)

“Wrote thesis on dispute resolution methods of the Dogon people, having lived among them in Mali for purposes of anthropology studies.” (Hired for internship position, and has since been retained by another part of the company.)

“Worked for children's organization while a Mormon missionary in Sicily.” (This was the first summer intern we hired; she went on to become a partner at a law firm in California.)

These applicants felt it was important to put these items on their CV's, as if to say, “there's more to me than just my legal background. I've done things in life. I intend to do more, whether you hire me or not.” You don't let CV's like these sink to the bottom of the pile.

In fairness, and as guidance, I should note there are other items that, once a CV has gotten a prospective employer's attention, will help land that position in international dispute resolution:

- **Breadth of relevant interest.** Studies or professional background showing experience or interest in different types of dispute resolution: arbitration, civil litigation, mediation, negotiation. It's all good. The broader, the better.
- **Language skills.** Speaking more than one language really helps. If you don't have the languages, it won't hurt to show that you're at least trying by taking courses.
- **International work experience.** Having done anything at all outside of your home country is good to show, if you can.

In the end, though, you want your character to come through. Life experiences and accomplishments outside of the field of dispute resolution may be the best way to do this.

And if you don't have life experiences to show your adaptability and mental agility, maybe you

should get some before embarking on a career in international dispute resolution.


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