by Caroline Baum
How to Find a Job on Capitol Hill

Norman H. Shapiro

I suspect that almost all Americans have at some time wondered what really goes on in Congress, and it was this desire to get a first-hand perception of Capitol Hill that prompted me to look for a job on a congressional staff.

My job search began shortly after my graduation from The University of Chicago Law School and ended successfully four and one-half months later. Through searching, I developed an understanding of how the hiring process works on the Hill, particularly if one is interested in a position as a professional. From this understanding I distilled general rules on how to approach the process.

These rules are not perfect. Following them guarantees one only an interesting, although probably quite frustrating, experience. Yet, I do believe they provide positive suggestions that will maximize one’s chances for success.

Rule 1: Among those competing for professional staff positions, good credentials are common. Great credentials are also common.

Before coming to Washington to look for a job, I wrote letters. Hundreds of letters. To Congressmen. To Senators. To staff directors of all the House and Senate committees. But, with one unfortunate exception, these letters failed to generate anything resembling a viable job opportunity.

There are at least two reasons why this letter assault failed. First, my credentials were not good enough to give me a competitive edge. Sure, I was a recent graduate of a good law school with a solid academic background and a variety of political experience. Yet, everyone looking for a job on the Hill seems to have a similar background. My credentials only put me in the running.

Second, letters are virtually a waste of time. The average congressional office may have over a thousand resumes on file (if they bother to keep resumes at all). One Senate office claims to have received over four thousand resumes when first setting up operations. Sending one more resume by mail simply adds to the files (with no guarantee that the files are sufficiently well organized to permit retrieval) and subsidizes the US mail.

Rule 2: Sometimes you get screwed.

One letter I sent actually did more than subsidize the mail. A few weeks after I sent my first batch of job letters, I received a phone call from the office of then Senator John Durkin, Democrat of New Hampshire. His office was looking for a legislative assistant. Did I have any interest? With all the cool poise I could muster, I believe my response was something like “Hell, yes.” I flew from Chicago to Washington to reconnoiter the situation.

I met with the Senator and his administrative assistant (AA). We chatted about me, we chatted about the job, and we chatted about money. (They wanted to pay in the neighborhood of $12,000; I had a somewhat different community of numbers in mind.) When the interview was over, I was told that they would let me know.

Wrong. I wrote. I called. I prayed. The silence was both deafening and debilitating. I lost other employment opportunities while trying to pierce THE GREAT SILENCE. A year and a half later, I unofficially learned that the entire issue had been deferred and the AA had been too embarrassed to tell me.

Rule 3: To look for a job on the Hill, you must go to the Hill; the Hill is not going to come to you.

After the failure of my letters, I decided that the only serious way to look for a congressional staff position was to look first-hand. So, after taking the bar exam, I went to Washington. I am absolutely convinced that without coming to D.C. I would have had virtually no chance of finding a job on the Hill.

Rule 4: If you want to be a clerk/typist, go to the Placement Office. But is that why you went to law school?

One of the first places one hears of upon arrival on the Hill is the Placement Office. While I have never been there, I am told that it looks like a placement office and smells like a placement office. It is located in House Annex 1 and seems like the bona fide article. If you know how to type and want a job, typing, it is indeed the real McCoy.

However, for the professional seeking a job, it is not a placement office. It is an archive, preserving one’s resume, making it safe from the elements and from congressional offices, which rarely refer to it when filling legislative jobs.

Despite Rule 4, it is probably not impossible to get a professional posi-

Mr. Shapiro, a 1977 alumnus of the Law School, is associated with the Chicago law firm of Gottlieb & Schwartz.
tion on the Hill through the Placement Office, although I have never met anyone who claimed that that was his route to Hill employment. Anything is possible. Therefore, if you want to leave no stone unturned, give it a try.

Rule 5: You’d better know how to type.

The Placement Office requires that all job applicants, both clerical and professional, take a typing test. For some, this may seem personally demeaning. Yet all job seekers should keep this fundamental truth in mind: with the possible exception of the Members of the House and Senate, everyone types on Capitol Hill. Everyone. If you want to work there, you’d better know how to type. If you don’t know how, learn.

Rule 6: the magic word is contacts.

For those seeking a professional position, there is no Hill placement service. No unified institutional framework exists through which one passes one’s application on the way to employment nirvana. Rather, the magic (and only) word is contacts.

Each congressional unit hires its own staff in its own way. There is virtually no coordination between the hiring needs and practices of one office and another. In other words, hiring is an a\textit{ad} hoc procedure. Each office/committee/subcommittee is a fiefdom with its own royalty and its own court attendants. To land a job, one must attack the fiefs individually. And to know whether there are jobs in the fiefs, someone on the “inside” must tell you. This someone is a contact.

Rule 7: Contacts begin at home.

The first person(s) to whom the job seeker should turn is his Congressman and/or Senator. However, the average person will not see his elected representative. He will see an assistant or the receptionist. These staff people may say something like, “I’m sorry, but I am currently unaware of any job openings on the Hill.” Or, “It’s tough to find jobs on the Hill. We wish you the very best of luck. Please feel free to call upon us if you feel we may be of assistance.” Or, others might be advised (as Dustin Hoffman was in “The Graduate”), “Plastics, young man, plastics.” And, depending upon the market in the plastics industry, all these statements could be correct. For the job seeker, none is very helpful.

However, you can get meaningful help from the offices of your elected representatives. As a constituent, you have an implicit advantage when dealing with your own Congressman or Senator. Unlike other officials, they care whether you leave their offices happy. After all, you vote. Your family votes. Your relatives vote. Your friends vote. And voting is what democracy is, indeed, periodically about. Therefore, politicians and their staff want to make you happy; but it’s up to you to ask for the right kind of help, \textit{i.e.}, a list of staff in other offices who can provide job information. In a word, contacts.

This list is the most which the reasonable person should expect from his congressional office. It should also be the least.

Additionally, while your congressional office can supply some contacts, any one who knows someone on the Hill can perform the same function. Contacts can come from friends, your Aunt Matilda’s nephew who interned with Senator Snograss—anywhere.

Rule 8: Contacts beget contacts.

With a list of initial contacts in hand, you can begin the next and crucial stage of the job search process. Call the names on the list and say something like this:

‘Hello. (Clever beginning, eh?)
My name is ______ and ______ (name of person who referred you to him or her) suggested that I call you. I am a graduate of ______ (with luck, some semi or fully prestigious institution of higher learning) and, simply put, I’m just one of the legions looking for a job on Capitol Hill.

I was wondering whether you would mind if I asked you three questions (of the three hundred plus people I called, no one ever minded if I asked them three questions). I was wondering if you knew of any present jobs (virtually no one ever knew of any existing job openings) or of any potential jobs (nor of any potential jobs, either) or whether you would mind if I dropped off a resume to you.”

With few exceptions, Hill people agreed to see me when approached in this way.

The key part of such a conversation is the name of the person referring you. It is for him that the person is doing a favor by agreeing to see you. It is the key to getting on the “inside” past the receptionist, that arch foe of job seekers. It is the grease which makes the system work.

I used the first appointment with a contact as an opportunity to establish my legitimacy, to demonstrate that I was a serious person with a strong interest in working on the Hill and with the academic and political background to make me a credible candidate. During this meeting, I again asked whether the contact knew of any likely jobs. Sometimes he did. Most of these jobs held no interest for me, but job information of any kind can come in handy. Passing along job information to interested parties is a good way to make friends who may, in turn, become contacts.

Toward the end of the meeting, I asked: would the person mind if I called him once a week or so to see what he might have heard on the job grapevine? and would he feel comfortable about giving me additional names to call?

Almost no one minded if I called on a regular basis, though some preferred being called only once every two weeks. People’s reactions to the request for names varied—some yes, some no. I would then repeat the process with what new names I had received.

There are a number of comments to be made about his process, but the key is this: it worked for me. Through it I was able to develop a job information network of some 200 to 250 contacts spread throughout the Hill. Through periodic call backs I was able to “tap the job grapevine” and become, for a while, one of the more knowledgeable people as far as congressional job openings were concerned. In my four and a half months of active searching, I uncovered more than 130 jobs. These jobs ranged from receptionists, to administrative assistants, to legislative
assistants, to counsels. It is a proven system for identifying job opportunities in a fragmented institutional environment that lacks a unified and/or meaningful placement service.

Rule 9: Looking for a job can be fun if you're creative.

Contacts can come from and lead anywhere. All you need is a little imagination and a lot of chutzpah. For example, Tim Kraft, Jimmy Carter's first Appointments' Secretary, attended Dartmouth College. So did I—eleven years later. Although I had never met Mr. Kraft, I called The White House one day and asked to speak to him. Being direct and honest, I explained to his secretary that I did not know Mr. Kraft, but we had both graduated from the same college and I was looking for a job. She very, very nicely referred me to someone else on Mr. Kraft's staff who, although he didn't know of any jobs, agreed to see me because I suggested to him that, if nothing else, it would be nice to see the inside of The White House. After seeing him, I was referred to someone on The White House personnel staff whom I later called. I explained that I had been told to call for an appointment. When was convenient? He said that he had promised no such thing, but, after talking on the phone for a few minutes, he agreed to see me because I "had a sense of humor." Our eventual meeting went well, and he ended up pointing me toward a pretty good Hill job. Thank you, Dartmouth College.

Rule 10: Target.

Only a superman (or superwoman) and a hypocrite (somehow, I have difficulty envisioning someone in good faith bridging the ideological gap between, say, a Strom Thurmond and a Ted Weiss) could ever hope to concurrently apply for jobs everywhere on the Hill. Simple limits of human energy mandate that you target certain units for primary focus.

Targeting should be based first upon your interests and expertise. If your first love is the military and all you know or care about agriculture revolves around mealtime, it is questionable whether you should apply to the Agriculture Committee or to the offices of Members whose principle interest is agriculture. Further, the probability of being taken seriously in an area clearly outside your own expertise is low.

Second, you should consider a Member's general attitude on the issues. Not only are you going to have a greater chance of being hired if you see eye to eye on the issues with your potential boss, but you will also find the office an easier place to work. There are enough tensions inherent in a congressional office without there being daily disagreement on policy. If a given Member loves the MX missile and believes its the greatest thing since apple pie, and you believe that it is nothing but a boondoggle and another classic example of the military industrial complex in operation, then you might want to work for someone else. A simple means of determining a Member's general voting/policy orientation is through The Almanac of American Politics (available at your local library or bookstore). Among other information, it contains key votes as well as ratings of the Member by various groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union and the American Conservative Union.

Third, if you wish to maximize your chances of working in a stable environment, you should avoid those offices which have a history of high employee turnover. Members who have had trouble keeping past staff will probably have trouble keeping future staff. They may be Members for whom few, if any, would like to work. It is not unknown on the Hill, as elsewhere, for a given employer to be difficult or unreasonable. In a perfect world, the job seeker would look elsewhere. The problem is that such high turnover offices are, by definition, those in which, proportionately, the greatest number of jobs become available. For the persistent job seeker who has been looking for months, a job, any job, will look pretty good. It will be tempting. If taken, it will provide "Hill experience" (an advantage in getting the next job) and the opportunity to develop contacts from the inside. But, beware. As you go about your business of looking for a job, ask your contact what offices to avoid. People will tell you. And, if you end up taking a job in a high turnover office, at least it will be with both eyes open.

Rule 11: Do not get angry.

You may find, as I did, that the job-seeking process taxes your patience. For example, the most common frustration that I found arose when potential contacts who had promised to meet at a given time and place either failed to do so or kept me waiting for an hour or more. In such circumstances, it is understandable if one gets angry. It is also totally counterproductive. Hill people, particularly the kind of professional staff one wants to meet, have all kinds of things requiring immediate attention that descend on them without notice. They can have the best intentions, yet fate may conspire against them on a given day. Do not despair and do not get angry. Just make another appointment. Your patience may be rewarded with a more productive discussion than might otherwise have occurred.

Rule 12: Do not leave a resume with a receptionist.

If for some reason the contact you are meeting for the first time is unavailable, there is the temptation to leave your resume with the receptionist so that at least the contact will get it and the trip to the office will not be totally wasted. Do not give in to temptation. It is possible that your resume will not reach its intended destination. More importantly, if your contact does get the resume, you no longer have an excuse to meet with him. You may thereby lose your opportunity to demonstrate legitimacy and establish rapport.

Rule 13: Extremism in the pursuit of organization is no vice; moderation in the pursuit of organization is no virtue. Or, notecards can be fun.

As I began to develop more contacts, I also developed a serious organizational problem. I had begun keeping track of people and appointments on legal-size paper. I then went to an address-calendar book. I ended up with notecards. I had one contact per notecard with the following information: name, office phone number and address, employer and job title, name of the person who referred me, and some note about each communication or meeting.

As time went on, weeks became divided into cycles: one period spent on the Hill meeting people and the
next period spent calling the new names who had been suggested in those meetings. This cycle might be repeated three or four times in a given week. Further, all those who already had agreed to help had to be called regularly to learn whether they had heard of anything new on the job grapevine. Week in and week out. Basically, it meant this:

One must be willing and able to continue the job-search grind. I wore out a pair of shoes and nearly my sanity in the attempt. An assault on the Hill must raise itself to the heights of a magnificent obsession. Contacts must be relentlessly and diplomatically pursued. Cards must be updated. Charm must be exuded. Legitimacy must be established. Reliability and consistency of effort must be maintained. One must not leave any stone unturned, any potential contact unexplored, or any reasonable opportunity unexploited. In short, one must be compulsive in order to maximize the probability of success.

One can, however, persist only to the limits of one's financial and emotional resources. For me, it was difficult. Indeed, but for a small windfall inheritance and the substantial moral encouragement of friends and family, I would have given up after only a couple of months. A couple of months, however, is often not enough. Four months is a reasonable minimum for which to plan. Moreover, I recommend a part-time job, not only for income but also to provide diversion and help maintain mental equilibrium. I worked at looking for a job full time. This was a mistake, for it made me stale and more compulsive than I already was and probably quite a boring person. Finally, I found regular exercise to be a great and needed relaxer.

Rule 15: Persistence provides its own rewards.
As time goes on, contacts often become more than simply that. They start pulling for you. Toward the end of my job search I often found that I could not walk down a corridor of the congressional office buildings without one of my contacts greeting me with some words of encouragement. I had gone through my rite of passage, and they respected the quality of my effort. Their support helped to provide some of the emotional ammunition I needed to keep the process alive.

Something else helped, too; notwithstanding all the past disappointments and rejections, success required that I be in the right place at the right time once and only once. This preeminent fact was emotionally supporting. It made a difference for me. Every day.

This is not to suggest that depression is not reasonable given sufficient incentive. For example, at one point I was competing to be a speech writer and international relations aid to a senior Democratic Senator. I had been through several interviews and the field had been narrowed from over eighty to just three. It was the job of my dreams. It had to be mine. But guess what? The Lord works in very mysterious ways, and someone else got the job.

Rule 16: An unanswered phone helps no one.
Make it easy for the contact to get in touch with you. I used an answering service. The Hill is a very busy place, and a person may intend to let you know about job information, try to call, fail to reach you, and then forget all about it. I didn't want to risk losing a job because of an unanswer phone. I also found that having an answering service impressed potential contacts, adding to the legitimacy of my effort.

Another way to impress contacts and maximize the probability that job information will be passed along is to give contacts a colored rolex card with your name and phone number. I think this demonstrates creativity and makes it quite easy for someone to locate your phone number if desired. Moreover, once on the rolexed, your card acts as a constant reminder of your existence, particularly as it probably will be the only colored card there. While it is only a gimmick, it might work.

Rule 17: It pays to advertise.
As a job seeker, what one wants to do is attract attention to one's availability and credentials as quickly and as widely as possible. Why not advertise? There is a Capitol Hill newspaper called "Roll Call" which goes to all Hill offices. It occasionally carries advertisements for job openings. Why not do the opposite; why not advertise your availability? Such ads would reach all the Hill offices where the right people might read them. The ad would cost money, but if it saves months of looking and results in a job, why not?

Further, in terms of advertising, the Democratic Study Group (DSG) circulates a list of job openings to all offices of DSG members. This relatively new service lists all types of jobs, with about 15 openings listed at any one time. Such openings typically indicate the job requirements but not the office involved. You simply submit a resume to DSG to apply for a specific job. I suspect the latest DSG listings can be acquired by asking your congressional office or other contacts. Although DSG's service is obviously valuable, you must remember that the more visible the opening, the greater the competition. Further, such jobs may indicate high turnover offices with all that that implies.

Rule 18: Independence Avenue is not the only way to the Hill.
Miss Hamerin, my eighth-grade math teacher, was particularly fond of saying "There's more than one way to Chicago than by Sheridan Road." She's right. An alternative route to a Hill job is the internship. Although most interns are undergraduates, one need not be a college-aged intern in order to reap the possible employment benefits an internship provides. Hill offices, particularly on the House side, are usually understaffed even when "fully staffed." There is typically more to be done and more that could be done than the staff can ever do. A job seeker might volunteer to work one or two days per week for a Member in whom he has an interest. Such an "internship" would provide Hill experience, contacts, and a base from which to make additional contacts. While there is a risk that such an internship could lead nowhere, there nonetheless is a strong possibility that a person with graduate-school credentials might be asked to do "legislative research" or to undertake a special project. The contacts and
experience gained through this work may lead to a paid position.

Rule 19: There's gold in that thar Hill.

Other than a job itself, your best discovery is someone else who has just found one. Such people possess gold mines of current job information. For example, when my own job search ended, I knew of perhaps 35 job openings in the Washington, DC area. I suggest regularly asking your contacts whether they know of anyone who has recently landed a job. Such people are often willing to give job information, having recently endured the miserable experience of looking for a job themselves.

Rule 20: There is no time like the present.

Is there a better or worse time to look for a Hill job? Well, yes and no. Obviously, turnover is highest after the biennial elections, but that's when the most people are actively looking for jobs. Jobs are available the year round. It's all a matter of being at the right place at the right time. If I were an outsider, I would begin building up contacts six to eight weeks before the November elections, so that as turnover reached its peak after the election, I would be in a position to maximize my chance of hearing about openings. Yet, many such openings will be in the offices of freshman Members who, often as not, bring their own people to work with them. Moreover, openings in a freshman office are those about which an existing information network hears the least. So, it's six of one and a half dozen of the other, and, indeed, there is no time like the present.

Rule 21: You have to be lucky.

Just as there are stories about people who looked for six months on the Hill in vain (and there are), there are also stories about those who were hired upon walking into their first office. Luck always plays a role, sometimes the dominant one.

I was lucky. After an unproductive but pleasant meeting with a new contact, I left thinking that little of substance had been accomplished. As I got sixty yards down the corridor from her office and was about to turn the corner, the woman with whom I had just met yelled down the hall, "Norm, come back; I just heard of something." And, indeed, she had. Just after I left, she had returned a phone call and asked whether that person had heard of anything. He had; he himself was hiring. And that was the job I eventually landed. Yet, had I walked a little faster, or had my contact decided to call later, had not inquired about job openings, or had had laryngitis, it could all have been different.

So much for the rules of looking for a job on Capitol Hill. It typically is not an easy process and can often be a miserable one. It also is a process which may end unsuccessfully.

Yet, notwithstanding all the obstacles, I can only encourage those interested to try. The government needs good people. It always has and it always will. Indeed, we live in a democracy which, by definition, is only as good as the people who are actively involved with it. I would only hope that, through the rules just presented, more will have the know-how to find the kind of job they want and would choose to exercise the will to serve.