

SBOT Leadership Interview Questions



Alma Hernandez-Blackwell
Assistant Regional Counsel
Age: 33

1. *What are your job responsibilities at FEMA?*

I am responsible for a variety of issues but I mainly serve as part of the legal advisory team to the Regional Administrator of Region VI. Issues range from personnel law, hazard mitigation, public assistance, individual assistance, environmental and historic preservation, and of course, emergency planning and preparedness.

2. *Please describe your organizational structure (e.g., what department are you in, who do you report to, etc.).*

FEMA has 10 Regions across the United States. I am in Region VI, which encompasses the states of Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arkansas, and Louisiana. I am assistant regional counsel to the Regional Counsel of the Region and report to her. We are part of the Regional Administrator's office of the Region. He oversees all operations within the Region.

3. *What do you find most challenging in your position?*

Right now, the most challenging thing I face is learning the relevant laws with respect to FEMA specific programs. I've only been in my current position for a little over six months and while coming over from another federal agency has helped with my transition, I still have a lot to learn in order to better serve my client.

4. *What do you most enjoy about your position?*

Right now, it's all the learning. I love learning new things and meeting new people. With FEMA, there are, unfortunately, always going to be disasters that require work, thus, I know that I will always be challenged with new issues and will have an opportunity to work with various people along the way.

5. ***What do you wish you had known earlier in your career?***

While the path to where I currently am has been a difficult one, I am grateful for the experiences, both good and bad, that have happened in my career. I wouldn't say there was anything I wish I had known.

6. ***Is there anything in particular you think a young attorney should consider before moving in-house or to a government position?***

I don't think there is anything to consider that wouldn't make someone want to work for the public sector. In my opinion, working in the public sector is much more personally rewarding because what I do affects a wide spectrum of people on a daily basis. The work/life balance is perfect and the benefits are great. Unlike what people assume, the pay is also reasonable. Of course, this year, the government did have a pay freeze....

7. ***In general, what can an attorney expect compensation-wise in an entry-level position in a federal legal department? Is the compensation comparable to the compensation with a large firm?***

I think the compensation is very comparable. Starting salary probably ranges around \$60,000. Depending on what agency you start with, upward mobility can be very fast paced. I've attached the salary table for government employees. I started at the GS-11 level as a legal honors intern with the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

8. ***What opportunities does a young attorney have for career development or advancement within your organization?***

FEMA, despite budget constraints, is definitely willing to train all of its employees well. During my first three weeks on the job, I was sent for two weeks of training in DC. This tells me that they are willing to get you the education you need in order to provide you with a solid base to properly advise, and it also adds to our resumes. In addition, there are numerous training opportunities on-line that you can do at your own pace. There is also an Emergency Management Institute that provides a university type atmosphere for learning.

9. ***Sometimes lawyers within law firms express a desire to move into a government role because of the perception of better work-life balance as a government attorney. How is your work-life balance?***

I couldn't ask for a better work/life balance. Most federal agencies provide flex time, meaning that you can report to work anywhere between 6:00 am and 9:30 am, work your 8.5 hours and then be done with your day. (Obviously, you would have a designated reporting time – for instance, at my previous agency, I reported at 6:00 am and worked until 2:30 every day, but the flexibility is there to

allow for changes every now and then.) Now I report to work at 7:30 and get off at 4:00. Most agencies also allow for a compressed work schedule and some even allow teleworking to allow you to work from home a few days a week. This is just unheard of in the private sector.

10. *Has the change in the economy affected your job or other legal positions at FEMA? And if so, how?*

President Obama did issue a pay freeze for all federal employees this year. This means federal employees will not be given the cost of living increase we typically receive every year.

11. *What advice would you give young attorneys about seeking out a position within the government, either in a legal or non-legal position?*

You have to make contacts. Introduce yourself to people at agencies or companies where you think you may be interested in working. If you can, volunteer at the place. Get your foot in the door and show them what you can do.

Get varied experience. The more skills you have on your resume, the more marketable you will be.

Learn another language! A lot of agencies and companies need bilingual people, whether it is in a legal or non-legal position.

Be willing to take a pay cut or a down-grade in position. Sometimes you have to take a step down before you can take a step up. I see a lot of people unhappy with their positions at firms but unwilling to take a pay cut. Sometimes it could be worth it. You can't put a price on happiness.

Don't be afraid of change! Change is good! Whether you have to take a pay cut or make adjustments in your commute or take a change in position...it could all be worth it. Don't be afraid to find out!

Don't make excuses! There are many reasons why you should stay where you are, but there are just as many reasons, if not more, to try something new. It may appear easier for someone else to do it, but it's just as easy for you to do it, too.

12. *Do you have any suggestions that might help young attorneys, especially new law school graduates, who are struggling in today's job market?*

I really feel for those coming out of law school now. But the fact is that these days, you must have experience to get a job. With so much competition now, just being editor of a law journal is not going to cut it. You have to have varied experience on your resume. You also need to be willing to work in a non-legal position. Just getting your foot in the door can pay off big in the long run.