



John Jo, Debt / Equity Placement

HFF, LP

YLG Co-Chair of the Boardroom After Hours

How did you find your way into the industry? ULI definitely played a role in helping me break into the industry. My first job out of college was with a large consulting firm but after two years of living out of a suitcase, I knew that wasn't the career for me. I left and took a position at a bank doing some random internal operations gig. I eventually learned about the bank's construction lending division and knew that this was where I wanted to focus my career. After a few failed attempts, I transitioned to the credit team; I was told "no" three or four times because I didn't have the credit / underwriting background that he was looking for. To get past this, I bought real estate financial analysis books, took classes at UCI extension, and joined ULI to learn/absorb as much as I could.

What advice would you give to an emerging young leader just starting their professional career? I think a great place to start is by reading Stan Ross's "The Inside Track to Careers in Real Estate" because it gives a real estate newbie a high level breakdown of the different facets of real estate. From there, use the resources around you (e.g. ULI, NAIOP, etc.) to set up coffee meetings or informational interviews with the companies that you want to work for. Blasting out your resume is a tough way to break into any company but setting up an informal coffee meeting is an easy way to meet someone; and if the timing is right, it may turn into a more formal interview or job offer. It worked for me.

What traits do you think define a successful leader? Vision, Passion, Personality, and Credibility. The most inspiring leaders that I have had the pleasure of working with had these traits. They were able to rally others around them to get buy-in on their idea/investment/project and were able to inspire others to work on the deal and see it through. I also find that the best leaders focus on the ultimate goal and use their teams effectively. Sure, mistakes happen, but these leaders focus on the solution and moving on, not pointing the finger or throwing people under the bus--that does nothing but create more roadblocks.

What is your current job and what types of projects are you working on now? I work at HFF as a capital markets intermediary (fancy term for a broker), helping our clients secure debt or equity financing through the relationships that we have with the financing community. I really enjoy this side of the business because every day, every deal, every Sponsor, there's something new that I have to learn about or read up on to familiarize myself with. I'm fortunate enough to work for a company and group of producers where I get a lot of deal flow past my desk. There is no typical day or deal, for that matter. Right now, I'm working on several deals in various stages: a class A office campus that includes a construction component; a distribution center with a construction component that will add 300,000 square feet; a 6-property retail portfolio; an 8-property retail portfolio for the same Sponsor; a 400+ unit apartment project; and an office repositioning with a creative / open floor plan component.

What do you find most challenging about your profession on a day-to-day basis? My workload often impacts my personal life so I'm making a conscious effort to balance it out as best I can so that I can still see my wife and kids yet perform at the level that is expected of me at work. Part of that has to do with balancing my workload at work. Deals can go on-hold or be in different stages so it is ideal to be committed to several deals at once, in various stages. However, there are those days where all of your deals come to life at the same time, and I've gotten crushed as a result.

What are you looking for in terms of career development - OR In what areas would you like to professionally develop further? I feel that I could improve on my presentation/public speaking and networking skills, since both are critically important in this business.

Describe a situation that was a great learning experience. I took on a project for a new client that had a short timeline. The producer that I was working with gave vague instructions so I took it upon myself to make certain assumptions and run with the deal. By doing so, I ended up having to re-do my analysis because it was not what the producer wanted and, due to the short timeline, I had to work until 5:30am in order to meet the client's deadline. To me, that situation taught me the important (and painful) lesson getting a team together to set a game plan, clearly identify roles and responsibilities, set up status checkpoints, and have a clear understanding of what is expected._

How do you deal with stress at work? Every now and then, my two-year old will hijack my wife's phone and call me on my office line; it helps me in one of two ways: (1) when my two-year old picks up the phone and talks nonsense to me, it brushes away any stress for that day and helps me hit the reset button; (2) when I pick up the phone and hear both of my kids screaming, I know that going home won't be any better and that my poor wife is probably having a more stressful day than I am, so I shouldn't complain.