



## How to Hire Right: Tips for Interviewing Success

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As a firm administrator you are often involved with hiring lawyers for your law firm. This article will highlight ways for you to make sure that the interview process works so that the best hiring decisions are made.

### What characteristics are you seeking?

To begin with, you can help your lawyers identify what they are looking for in future hires. Every firm has its unique culture and by understanding what traits make an attorney a success at your firm, you can help those interviewing to focus on assessing candidates for these qualities. You can start this process by asking a couple of practice group heads to describe the associates (without necessarily mentioning specific names) whom they wish they could clone? Take note of the specific traits they mention. You may actually hear similar characteristics from partners in different practice groups. These are the traits that are culturally specific to your unique firm. Next, you can use this information to revise your current evaluation form. For an evaluation form to be useful in decision making, it needs to ask the interviewer to evaluate the candidate on traits that are critical for success. Often times evaluation forms ask

the interviewer to regurgitate the information that is on the resume rather than to assess the candidate. Ideally your evaluation form should ask for specific comments rather than just ratings. In the 54 law firms that I have provided interview training, the majority have found that when the interviewer is asked to rank candidates, most interviewers rated all candidates in the middle (i.e., 3 on a scale of 1 to 5). If 80% of candidates end up with the same ranking, these types of ratings end up being useless in decision making.

A good question to ask at the end of the evaluation form is: "Would you want this attorney to work with you and your clients?" Many interviewers are comfortable saying, "Sure, hire her, as long as she does not work in my group." Unfortunately, there is no place in a firm for candidates that no one wants in his or her practice group.

### How to prepare for the interview

As important as interviewing is to the recruitment of future talent (and ultimately future clients), it is often "squeezed in" between current client matters. Many candidates have reported that not only had the lawyer interviewing

them not read their resume, but they could not even find a copy of the resume on their desk! Preparation helps the interviewer to get the most important information from the candidate, which again ensures the quality of the decision making.

Help your lawyers to prepare by giving them specific roles in the interview process. Ask the first lawyer on the schedule to focus on the candidate's education and then ask the second interviewer to focus on why the candidate wants to leave his or her current firm. If you give interviewers specific areas to explore and they have a task to accomplish, they are more likely to focus and get the information needed. Otherwise, the interview can easily turn into a "nice conversation." Your lawyers' time is limited and they have a lot going on; giving them a role and a purpose helps to keep them focused.

### Conducting the Interview

The goal of the interview is to assess and sell. The best way to assess is to ask questions that reveal evidence as to how the candidate has behaved in the past.

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## Interviewing

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Almost every candidate you see is smart enough to tell you what you want to hear. If you ask them if they are motivated, they are sure to tell you, "Yes, I am motivated!" But if you ask for examples of how they handled competing client demands or how they were able to manage law school, an internship and the journal, you will get a better sense of how hard they have worked in the past and whether or not they have learned to prioritize. As most lawyers like evidence, they tend to be very open to asking behaviorally-based questions.

It is also important to distinguish your firm for the candidate. Especially for law students, all firms sound the same on paper. As a matter of fact, the majority of firm resumes in the NALP Guide to Law Firms say the same thing, which is some version of the following: "We are a collegial firm, with interesting clients and dynamic work." Even if you are not interested in hiring the candidate, they should walk out of your offices thinking, "What a great place. I hope they give me an offer!" You may not want this candidate, but you may want their roommate, journal colleague, or fellow student. Unfortunately, not every lawyer knows how to sell his or her firm. You can help by collaborating with your marketing professionals and putting together a "fact sheet" that highlights the firm's successes.

### How to ask difficult questions?

Making sure your lawyers address "difficult questions" with candidates without turning the candidate off can be a challenge. During my Interviewer Training workshops when we do a "preparing for the interviewer" exercise with sample resumes, the first questions the lawyers in the session want to ask the candidate are the things that stand out to them in a negative, such as gaps in the

resume, why someone would leave a successful career to attend law school or why there were frequent job changes. Although it is critical to get this information in order to make good hiring decisions, how and when these questions are asked can make or break the interview. Please encourage your lawyers to first establish rapport with the candidate, ideally by asking questions that allow the interviewee to speak about successes and areas of which they are proud before delving into difficult questions. Once rapport has been established, have them ask these difficult questions in a positive, open-ended way. This will prevent the candidate from becoming defensive. Examples of ways to phrase difficult questions could include:

- ◆ "How do you hope your years of business experience will help you in the practice of law?" instead of "Why would someone who was a successful banker go to law school?"
- ◆ "Can you tell me a little about the transition time between your last job and when you began law school?" instead of "Where were you between 2003 and 2004?"
- ◆ "You had so many different experiences on your resume, please tell me which one(s) fit best for you and why?" instead of "Why do you keep jumping around?"

To summarize, effective interviewing is key to bringing in the "right" legal talent to your firm. Unfortunately, interviewer skills are not taught in law school. By helping your attorneys to assess candidates and market your firm to them, you will ensure that the best hiring decision is made and that your clients have the strongest attorneys working for them.

## 5 Tips for Effective Interviewing

1. Identify the traits that are key to success at your firm and ask behaviorally-

based questions to determine if the candidate has the characteristics for which you are looking. Examples of these types of questions include:

- ◆ Can you give me examples of how you have handled assignments in areas of law that you did not study in law school?
- ◆ How do you deal with difficult clients?
- ◆ What did you learn from that work experience?
- ◆ How would your professor/supervisor describe you?
- ◆ Bring me through your thought process on that legal issue....

2. Encourage your interviewers to listen more than they speak. The goal should be for the candidate to do the majority (at least 60%) of the talking so the interviewer can learn as much as possible.

3. Make sure your attorneys prepare in advance and ask good questions. During most 30-minute interviews, the interviewer only gets to ask 4-6 questions. Prior to the interview, have your lawyers identify at least three questions they want to ask to ensure that key areas are addressed during the interview.

4. Make sure your lawyers do not ask questions that reflect unconscious biases. I am still amazed how often I will hear from candidates that they were asked an inappropriate question by an attorney! You may want to give your lawyers a list of questions that can not be asked including:

- ◆ What kind of last name is that?
- ◆ Where did you grow up?

- ◆ With your many years of experiences how will you feel about reporting to people who are younger than you?

- ◆ Who will be taking care of your kids when you have to work late?

These are real questions that I know lawyers have asked candidates. I would also remind them that if they start a question by saying, "I know I should not be asking you this..." it does not make the question okay to ask.

5. Follow-up, Follow-up, Follow-up! Top candidates will have multiple offers to choose from. If you really want the student or lateral to join your firm, ask key lawyers to call the candidate to encourage them to accept. If at all possible have partners take these target candidates to lunch or dinner. Candidates who feel wanted by your firm believe they have a better chance of being successful. I have heard students with multiple offers say, "If they treat me like they really want me during the interview process, then it gives me confidence that they are invested in me and will do whatever they can to help me be successful at their firm." ■

*Eva Wisnik founded Wisnik Career Enterprises, Inc. in 1996. For almost 10 years she was the Director of Recruitment & Training at Schulte Roth & Zabel and Cadwalader Wickersham & Taft LLP where she hired hundreds of law students and lateral candidates. Over the past 11 years, Eva has conducted Interviewer Training workshops for 54 law firms nation-wide. She is based in New York City and can be reached at [ewisnik@wisnik.com](mailto:ewisnik@wisnik.com). For more information, please visit [www.wisnik.com](http://www.wisnik.com).*