

# Professional Presence in Law Firms: What Does It Look Like?

by Eva Wisnik

The topic of professional presence often comes up when I am discussing an open recruitment or professional development position with a law firm hiring manager. Over the past 20 years, Wisnik Career Enterprises has interviewed thousands of candidates when searching for the right talent for our clients. Finding great talent is one of the most rewarding parts of my job, but unfortunately each week we interview candidates who fall short on professional presence — candidates we therefore cannot represent to our clients.

Although I think most of us have an intuitive sense of what professional presence looks like, we wanted to delve into this topic and see how it is described by those who are interviewing and managing talent in law firms. Are there specific objective indicators that cause us to determine that a candidate has the professional presence needed and, if so, what are they? We surveyed heads of law firm recruiting, professional development, and human resources departments, asking them to share their insights on what “professional presence” looks like to them and, equally as important, how they decide whether it is lacking.

The survey feedback, combined with our research and more than 20 years of interviewing candidates, led to the following thoughts on what you may want to focus on when you are searching for new talent for your firm. Also, these insights may prove helpful when giving feedback to current team members to help them inspire the confidence of your toughest partners.

## “Professional Presence” Defined

The candidates we encounter with strong professional presence exude confidence and inspire our trust. Therefore, we feel great about sending them into firms. This is a wonderful situation when it happens, but what is it about these individuals that makes us feel this way? We asked our survey respondents, 40% of whom work for firms with more than 1,000 lawyers, to describe what professional presence looks like to them. The following are the key elements mentioned by the respondents:

1. *Physical presence*: appropriate attire, poise, good posture, and eye contact
2. *Interpersonal skills*: exuding a positive attitude, exercising discretion, being diplomatic, and being a good listener
3. *Work style*: being engaged, prepared, proactive, efficient, and calm under pressure
4. *Verbal/communication skills*: being articulate and concise, speaking properly (limited use of “likes” and “ums”), having a confident voice
5. *Personality traits*: being humble, authentic, mature, thoughtful, and having a sense of humor

What we found especially intriguing about these responses was that the vast majority of the characteristics that embody professional presence CAN be developed! Innate personality traits, like authenticity and sense of humor, comprised a relatively small portion of responses. This is promising, in that the professional presence that inspires others’ trust and confidence is something that can

be further developed in team members who have the smarts and skills you value. Kay Nash, Chief Talent Officer at Wiley Rein LLP, adds that she looks for “proactive traits, such as coming to meetings anticipating needs and prepared with materials needed — conference dial-in information, a list of attendees, etc.” Morgan Smith, Director of Professional Development at Dykema, adds, “The ability to be calm under pressure surfaces quickly, and is key to long-term success and building credibility in a law firm environment.”

Communications skills are a vital component of professional presence. When asked how a new employee can figure out what will work best in a particular firm culture, Diane Downs, Director of Attorney Recruitment at Morrison & Foerster LLP, advised, “Observe the culture of communication wherever you work and figure out who is most effective in various situations. Emulate those people. Be aware of when communications don’t go smoothly and avoid making similar mistakes. Be aware of how your communication is perceived by asking for feedback from peers and supervisors.”

## Professional Presence — During the Interview

Based on our survey, here are a few things that top candidates who possess professional presence do and don’t do during the interview process:

### They DO:

- Dress the part — they dress professionally, which includes wearing a suit and for women closed-toe shoes with no distracting jewelry or make-up.
- Research the job and firm — they do their homework and know why they are interviewing with a particular firm.
- Engage in the conversation and ask thoughtful questions.

### They DON’T:

- Speak badly about former employers or experiences.

- Come across as timid or, on the other hand, overly confident or arrogant.
- Just go through the motions and act disinterested in the opportunity.

Many of our respondents also mentioned the importance of confidence. When asked to elaborate further, we heard, “Someone who inspires confidence, who has a positive energy, and a genuine interest in learning and becoming an expert in the field.” Another respondent said the interviewees who stand out are “confident about the subject matter and capable of speaking with ease to any audience. They are also good listeners.” This demonstrates that confidence in one’s skills and expertise is critical for inspiring the trust of senior professionals.

## Professional Presence — Beyond the Interview

In addition to asking survey respondents what professional presence and confidence looks like during an interview, we also asked them, “Once someone is hired, what does it take to inspire your partners’ confidence?” According to the respondents, the most respected professionals:

1. Build trust by being responsive and doing what they say they will do.
2. Stay calm under pressure and navigate even the most stressful situations.
3. Are collaborative — they are easy to work with, admit mistakes, and give others credit.

When asked specifically about inspiring your most difficult partners’ trust, we heard that the most valued and strongest team members “have a business case for every recommendation, no matter how small. They show respect for partners’ time by clearing the clutter out of the meetings and focusing on the important stuff.” Another respondent added, “Partners respond well to professionals who are critical thinkers and are as comfortable with what they know as with what they don’t know.” Morgan Smith adds, “Anticipating part-

ners' needs or proactively handling administrative matters for them is always valued."

As for the top performers' interpersonal skills, they were described as being "authentic and capable of being direct and diplomatic." In terms of taking ownership, Kay Nash echoes this insight when she looks for "team members who take ownership to solve problems. For example," she says, "if a partner calls to ask a question, do they refer the person to someone else, or take ownership to track down the answer and resolve the issue themselves?" To build the trust with your internal clients, Diane Downs observes that "being energetic and having a positive attitude" goes a long way. She notes that if you "are highly responsive, even when you don't know the answer, you gain respect quickly." She adds, "A good response to when you 'kind of' know the answer, is to say 'I think the answer is \_X\_ but let me check on that and get back to you later today.' AND definitely get back to them after you have a confirmed answer."

## Increasing Professional Presence on Your Team

According to Joshua Ehrlich ("Developing Executive Presence," *Harvard Business Review*, December 6, 2011), "Presence is not some innate quality that you either have or do not. It is a set of learned behaviors that enable you to command attention." Our survey results echo this sentiment, as the majority of qualities mentioned were not inherent traits. Professional presence can always be further developed in existing team members who may fall a bit short, but have the skills you need. In addition, professional presence is something you can definitely be on the lookout for when interviewing new talent. Just think how smoothly things will go for you at work when you surround yourself with professionals who have what one respondent described as "good judgment, a positive energy, and the ability to inspire the confidence of the most difficult partners." I hope these tips help you in achieving this.

### Professional Presence Defined



*Eva Wisnik, President and founder of Wisnik Career Enterprises, has worked with over 120 law firms over the past 20 years, including 74 of the Am Law 100, and has placed more than 800 recruitment and professional development professionals into law firms nation-wide.*