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A Strategic Approach To Staffing

When it comes to making a big purchase, such as buying a car, most people will want to take it for a test drive, conduct research and ask for others' opinions before signing on the dotted line. Hiring a new employee is a similarly big commitment, considering that mistakes can cost your firm valuable time and money and lead to workplace stress.

With so much at stake, it's not surprising that employers are cautious when it comes to hiring – especially in today's economic environment. Many are taking extra measures to minimize the risk of making bad decisions, such as conducting multiple interviews and performing more extensive reference checks.

Many firms are also adopting a more strategic approach to their staffing practices in general, acknowledging that the traditional notion of simply trying to add or restaff full-time positions does not offer the versatility they require when needs are changing rapidly. Interim legal professionals provide law firms with the flexibility to meet shifting client demands without incurring the risks associated with overstaffing. By augmenting full-time staff with highly skilled project professionals, legal administrators can help their firms realize the following specific benefits:

- **Close gaps.** Interim employees can fill in for full-time staff during extended absences, lengthy candidate searches or when a hiring freeze is in effect.
- **Tap into critical talent.** Certain legal or administrative initiatives may demand expertise that is not currently available in-house. By bringing in a project professional with proven abilities, firms gain immediate access to the necessary skills and experience.
- **Meet short-term needs.** Many projects and cases require additional legal personnel for brief periods of intensive work but do not justify the hiring of full-time employees.

Recognizing that on-the-job performance remains one of the most reliable indicators of career success, firms also use interim or project professionals as a means of locating prospective candidates and evaluating their suitability for full-time roles. In fact, 38 percent of hiring managers recently polled by our company said that bringing a candidate in on a temporary basis provided the greatest insight into that person's future job performance.

Making the Most of Interim Professionals

Whether your firm is considering a strategic staffing approach as a means of evaluating candidates for attorney, paralegal or legal support roles; addressing workload fluctuations; or simply trying to maintain a competitive edge in an unpredictable environment, your success in using interim professionals depends on several factors. Here are some steps legal administrators can take to pave the way for a successful relationship with these individuals:

Provide a proper orientation. Preparing for the arrival of project professionals is very similar to the process you would follow for the orientation of full-time employees. Consultants will appreciate the time you spend familiarizing them with your firm, making introductions to key people and identifying the resources at their disposal. Also consider having a “kick-off” meeting with core team members to discuss all salient aspects of the project upfront.

Determine how to position the consultant. Before bringing in an interim professional, consider how you want the person’s role to be perceived inside and outside your firm. For instance, will he or she have a title? It is especially important to position the individual properly if he or she will interact with clients. In addition, before the temporary professional arrives, notify full-time staff of the consultant’s specific responsibilities and job title. If appropriate, inform internal employees who may feel threatened by an outsider’s presence that the person is there to make their jobs easier.

Prepare a workplace. To maximize the productivity of project professionals, set aside a dedicated work area or office and have all of the necessary equipment and materials available prior to their arrival. This will improve the odds of the project being completed in a successful and timely manner.

Communicate frequently. Have regular meetings with interim professionals to receive status reports. Let them know you value their expertise, but be direct in offering suggestions, clarifying responsibilities and outlining the scope of their authority. Also, engage them in a candid discussion about their experiences on the job. Often, consultants will have helpful suggestions for improving their effectiveness if you ask for their input.

As law offices re-examine the best approach to addressing staffing needs during periods of uncertainty and change, the expanded use of temporary professionals is an appealing option because of the flexibility it provides. By taking the right steps to ensure their success, you can count on interim legal professionals as needed to handle workload peaks or provide specialized expertise not available internally. Full-time hires can then be made when workloads stabilize enough to require ongoing attention. Through this more strategic approach to staffing, firms can better navigate changing business conditions while avoiding the costs and morale problems associated with significant fluctuations in employment levels.