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Evaluating Resumes Effectively

Evaluating resumes is a necessary, though sometimes tedious, part of a legal administrator's job. Because the resume is your first glimpse of a potential employee, you want to give each document fair consideration. If you don't give the task the attention it deserves, you might overlook a "diamond in the rough." Likewise, you don't want to waste time bringing in unsuitable candidates for interviews because you didn't scrutinize a document thoroughly.

While there are no sure-fire ways to identify the best prospective employees, certain techniques can be helpful when evaluating resumes. Here are some tips to make the process more manageable and productive:

Have a consistent process. Whether you sift through the stack of resumes yourself or delegate a trusted colleague to narrow them down, you need a set of fixed guidelines to streamline the process. This will help ensure you apply the same standards as you screen each resume. Many of these requirements were probably already determined prior to placing a job advertisement but are worth reinforcing as you begin your assessments. They include: Which qualifications and attributes are essential? What skills or experiences are less critical but desirable? For example, you may prefer to hire a paralegal who possesses a college degree but would be willing to consider someone with equivalent work experience.

Look for positive indicators. Beyond specific qualifications, look for promising signs that a candidate is worth interviewing. These might include a history of stability, a record of advancement and detailed descriptions of accomplishments and responsibilities in previous positions. Ideally, the resume should demonstrate how the individual's achievements contributed to the goals and profitability of past employers.

Don't neglect the cover letter. The cover letter offers candidates their best opportunity to explain why they're a good match for the position and your firm, so take the time to review it carefully. If the letter is really on point, you can probably assume that the candidate is genuinely interested in the position and has taken the time to learn about your firm. On the other hand, an uninspired or formulaic cover letter might help you rule out a job seeker. Also, since most legal positions require good written communication skills, the cover letter is a good way to gauge a prospective employee's aptitude in this area.

Factor in appearance. Professionalism and attention to detail are other key attributes required of law firm employees, so make sure to evaluate the look of the resume. A candidate who doesn't proofread for typos, misspellings and formatting problems is likely to lack these essential qualities.

Screen top candidates by phone. Save yourself valuable time by conducting brief phone interviews to further winnow the pool of candidates. A phone screen will allow you to clarify any questions that arose during the initial resume review. In addition, you can gain a sense of an applicant's communication skills, which can also help you decide whether to schedule a face-to-face meeting.

Be alert to red flags. Even if resumes and cover letters don't have obvious problems that call for automatic elimination, they may contain more subtle signs that suggest you should pass on a candidate. Some things to watch out for include:

- **Lack of career progression.** Be wary of candidates who have had a series of lateral positions with no apparent increase in responsibilities or other readily understandable reason for changing employers. A static job pattern may be a sign of a problem employee, possibly someone who lacks ambition or for some reason has not been able to gain promotion to the next level.
- **Generic job descriptions.** Steer away from job seekers who offer only general summaries of their previous job duties with no quantifiable results or accomplishments attached. Strong candidates can usually make a compelling case for their past achievements.

The process of reviewing resumes is critical to the hiring process, one that you want to master because it will allow you to zero in on the best candidates to interview. By setting clear standards for reviewing resumes at the outset – and sticking to them – you'll find that it becomes easier to quickly and effectively evaluate resumes and, ultimately, to make good hiring decisions.

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