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Hiring Right: Even More Important in a Down Economy

There's never a good time to make hiring mistakes. But during an economic downturn, the ramifications of selecting the wrong candidate can be especially costly to law firms. Selecting the wrong candidate adds to the already considerable expense of hiring, both in terms of time and money. In addition, productivity and even potential revenues may be lost if suitable and timely hires are not made.

In the current environment, however, it remains difficult to recruit top performers. Many of those with the most in-demand skills are already employed and unwilling to consider changing positions amid an uncertain economy. While there is no foolproof method for locating the best prospects, these proven strategies are worth revisiting:

Go the extra recruiting mile. Don't wait for the perfect person to come to you or settle for someone who doesn't seem quite right for the position. The best candidate may not be in your pool of applicants. Once you've identified the attributes desired in a new hire, list open positions with professional associations or other business groups likely to reach your ideal candidate. You may also want to use a recruiting or staffing firm that has access to experienced individuals who may not be actively looking for a new opportunity. And don't neglect to enlist your current employees as recruiters. They may know a colleague from a previous job who would be perfect for an open position, and someone who is already employed is more likely to consider a new opportunity if the outreach comes from someone they know and trust.

Prescreen candidates. To help you winnow the field further before scheduling in-person interviews, conduct brief screenings by phone to evaluate whether an individual seems to have the soft skills you're seeking. Because telephone interviews are more impersonal than face-to-face meetings, they can sometimes be a more objective means of rapidly assessing candidates.

Ask insightful interview questions. Once you've selected candidates to invite for in-person interviews, develop a list of core questions to ask each individual. Although you'll want to evaluate experience and knowledge in the legal field, you'll also need to get a sense of an applicant's interpersonal skills and "fit" with your firm's corporate culture. It may help to brainstorm questions with key staff members who understand what it takes to be successful in the position for which you're interviewing. Here are some possible questions to ask:

- What did you like best/least about your last position?
- What is the most interesting or challenging project or case you've worked on?
- If you could have made improvements in your previous position, what would they have been?

- Describe your favorite/least favorite coworker or supervisor.

Also consider including hypothetical questions to better gauge individual work styles. For instance, instead of asking candidates how they typically manage urgent assignments, you might ask, “If you were working on a high-priority project for one partner in our firm and another asked you to help with an emergency task, how would you handle the situation?”

In addition, be sure to query candidates about specific aspects of their experience and work history. Review each resume prior to the interview and flag any areas of special interest or concern that you’d like to explore further with the applicant.

Give your undivided attention. To enhance your ability to focus only on the interviewee, minimize distractions during the interview. Close your door, clear off your desk and hold incoming calls. This may seem like basic advice, but in the daily rush of business it’s easy to allow other priorities to take precedence.

Make sure you let the candidate do most of the talking during your meeting. After you’ve asked a question, allow him or her ample time to answer. Sometimes it takes an applicant a couple of minutes to address the crux of your question. Listen carefully to everything that’s said because you don’t want to miss any information that will help you make a better hiring decision. The warning signs of potential problems are often subtle.

To the extent that you can without being distracting, take a few notes that will help you remember a candidate. It’s also a good idea to allow yourself time to “debrief” after each interview and jot down additional observations or even discuss your impressions of individual candidates with others in the office. It can also be useful to develop a rating system to simplify the process of comparing each applicant’s qualifications.

Finally, one of the best ways to ensure you hire the right person is to “audition” temporary or project legal professionals for open positions. This approach removes much of the risk from the hiring process and allows you to more accurately evaluate an individual's qualifications before extending an offer of full-time employment.