

How to Successfully Recruit in Today's Increasingly Competitive Market

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Hiring in the legal job market has increased significantly recently, leaving law firms competing with each other to hire the best and the brightest associates. To succeed in this increasingly competitive market, law firms will need to engage in effective recruitment practices. This article is designed to warn law firms of five recruitment mistakes they should avoid.

Mistake Number One - Utilizing Unduly Narrow Hiring Criteria: Many law firms rely solely on narrow hiring criteria, consisting of class rank and law school rank, to select their new associates. There is no question that such criteria can help law firm recruiters to quickly and easily eliminate a large number of applications. However, law firms that utilize such criteria will find themselves in stiff competition with other law firms for the same small number of law school graduates. And, as was recently demonstrated in an article in the June 1998 edition of the National Association for Law Placement Bulletin, it is statistically impossible for more than a small number of law firms to meet their hiring goals while limiting their hiring to the top twenty percent of the class at the top twenty law schools. For this reason, law firms will need to consider other criteria to determine which candidates to hire. Such criteria (which might include writing skills, problem-solving skills, ability to communicate well, evidence of leadership ability, etc.) may take more time to determine, but will leave law firms with a larger number of quality applicants from which to choose. Similarly, during the recession years, many law firms curtailed their recruitment activity significantly by decreasing the number of schools at which they recruited on-campus. As the economy improves, and as more firms are increasing the number of entry level associates they hire, such limited recruitment activity will net these firms fewer associates than they need to fill their classes. Law firms need to branch out, cast a wider net, and recruit at a larger number of law schools to have the larger pool of applicants they will need.

Mistake Number Two - Failure to Properly Train Interviewers: A failure to properly train interviewers can lead to negative consequences for law firms. All interviewers should receive training to enable them to avoid any questions or actions that could be construed as illegal or discriminatory in nature. An interviewer who is not sufficiently well trained and who asks an illegal or discriminatory question could not only leave their law firm open to the possibility of a lawsuit, but could end up alienating candidates and, thereby, leaving their law firm with a bad reputation on law school campuses. Moreover, poorly trained interviewers tend to hire applicants who most resemble themselves. This can lead to a firm that is lacking in necessary diverse perspectives and problem-solving styles. And, it can work against any goal the firm may have of maintaining a diverse workplace.

Mistake Number Three - Failure to Sell The Firm's Unique Strengths: As the competition increases among firms to hire associates, it will become important for law firms to distinguish themselves from other law firms. Law firms will need to articulate their strengths and the unique features that set them apart from their competition. Just as applicants must set themselves apart to be attractive to potential employers, so too must law firms make known what makes them a law firm of choice.

Mistake Number Four - Failure to Provide Mentors for All Associates: Mentorship is a necessary ingredient to an associate's success in a law firm. Mentors can provide support to associates essential to helping them successfully integrate into the firm and increase the likelihood of their retention by the firm. Such support includes: (1) providing associates with valuable information about the firm's corporate culture (they show associates "the ropes"); (2) going to bat for an associate in the event that the associate makes a mistake and help the associate learn from his or her error; (3) helping associates obtain the kind of challenging work assignments that will enable them to grow and develop; (4) introducing associates to important clients and help them develop these necessary relationships; and (5) serving as an advocate for the associate when he/she is up for partner.

Unfortunately, human nature is such that people tend naturally to mentor those persons who remind them of themselves when they were younger. While this tendency may be benign in intent, it can have detrimental career consequences for those associates from diverse backgrounds who do not resemble the majority of the firm's partners and senior associates. For a law firm to make the most of its substantial investment in its associates, the firm must provide them with mentors to ensure that each associate has an equal opportunity to succeed.

Mistake Number Five - Not Following Through on Recruitment Promises: It is well known that many law firms wine and dine their summer associates in an effort to entice them to accept their offers of permanent employment. Such efforts, however, will be for naught if, once the individual joins the firm, they find a completely different and less receptive atmosphere than was apparent during the summer. Such firms may successfully fill their entry level class of associates but stand to lose them to other firms in the next few years. This loss of trained associates can be a significant financial loss to a law firm.