

HR Feature

HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

Recruiting Remodel

Advice to law firms for implementing alternative hiring methods

For decades, fall has been synonymous with summer associate recruiting for law firms. The race to select the best candidates has only intensified over the years and has become particularly challenging in the post-recession legal world.



MARY KATE SHERIDAN
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BRUCE MACEWEN
*Co-Founder, JDMatch
and President, Adam
Smith, Esq.*



According to the National Association for Law Placement's (NALP's) report, *Perspectives on Fall 2013 Law Student Recruiting*, "Many law firm recruiting professionals reported feeling as if they were competing fiercely with other firms for the same small group of job candidates." Firms have fewer spots to fill, making each summer associate offer even more critical.

Despite this new landscape, many firms have maintained the same recruiting model: the on-campus interview and callback. But this approach is not without its flaws, and given the impact of each hire, firms may question if they should refine their recruiting strategies to better meet their goals.

DISADVANTAGES OF THE CURRENT RECRUITING MODEL

"I've lived under the [on-campus interview] model for 20 years, and there are some aspects that I would change, but there are also elements of it that work incredibly well," says Caren Ulrich Stacy, Founder, OnRamp Fellowship and Legal Talent Lab. "We get to see a lot of great students at an awful lot of great schools in a compressed time frame. And from that, we tend to get really great people, some of whom go through the ranks and make partners."

Firms have relied on the current legal recruiting model for years and with good reason. Many highly successful attorneys have been discovered through the process. But no system is perfect. In fact, there are plenty of disadvantages to the on-campus interview model.

No Structure

Recruiting departments have mastered the intricacies of interview season, but in many law firms, the interviews themselves are unstructured, without any specific hiring goals or standard questions. The current process is "very informal and not systematic," says Dr. Larry Richard, Founder and Principal Consultant at LawyerBrain LLC. "Firms end up picking someone based mostly on likability. They're using a completely random, unsystematic, unscientific approach that makes no psychological sense."

Oftentimes, firms don't provide interview training for those helping out with the hiring, and they tend to put client and business needs ahead of the interview process. As a result, interviewers may be unprepared or randomly assigned, leading to a lack of consistency and calibration, says Mark Levin, Co-Founder and General Counsel of The Right Profile, a service focusing on predictive talent selection. "If that's the gateway for people coming in," he says, "you'd think it would be one of the most important things for the people to do."

Lack of Control

Firms have total control over the callback process, but when it comes to the on-campus interview process, schools hold the reigns. For example, firms often have little to no input into which students they will interview. "The worst thing about [the on-campus interview process] is it's basically been designed of, by and for the schools," says Bruce MacEwen, Co-Founder of the legal recruiting platform JDMatch and President of Adam Smith, Esq.

Massive Expense

Recruiting is expensive, and it isn't merely the travel costs, on-campus interview fees, materials and event costs. Each attorney who dedicates time to recruiting is foregoing billable hours. Firms should think carefully about how to best formulate and execute their recruiting strategies to justify the cost.



Steelcase

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DR. LARRY RICHARD
 Founder and
 Principal Consultant,
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Limited Reach

Given the sheer expense, firms can't travel to and participate in every law school's on-campus interview program. Adhering strictly to the on-campus interview model, therefore, can restrict firms significantly in the candidates to whom they have access.

"Firms can't go to every campus, but a lot of firms like to hire the top students at tier 2 and tier 3 schools," says Janet Stanton, Co-Founder of JDMatch and Partner of Adam Smith, Esq. Instead of sticking to the standard on-campus interview mode, firms can customize their recruiting process to specifically reach these top candidates.

THINKING OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

With these drawbacks in mind and the ever-present competition for top talent looming, firms may consider refining their recruiting plan by implementing the following:

Structured Interviews

Structured interviews offer firms the opportunity to streamline their interview processes with preset hiring criteria, standard questions and well-trained interviewers. Benefits of structured interviews include greater accuracy in predicting good performers, less interview bias and firmer ground to defend the process, according to the research company Lawyer Metrics' report, "Structured versus Unstructured Interviews."

In developing a structured interview process, Richard of LawyerBrain LLC advises firms first to “identify clear criteria for hiring by looking at the people in your firm who already have proven to be stars. If you want good people, you have to know what good is.” Once a firm has established specific hiring criteria, it should create a set of standard questions that it can use across interviews. And firms must train their attorneys on how to properly conduct the interviews.

One firm that has found success with structured interviews is Schiff Hardin, LLP, which implemented a new callback framework in 2011. According to Lisa Brown, Professional Development Director at Schiff Hardin, the firm modified its process to include a panel interview, along with two individual interviews and a lunch. In developing its new recruiting strategy, the firm sought out the specific attributes of success within the firm. From here, the firm generated several evaluation categories from which it built standard behavioral interview questions. The firm also trained attorneys extensively in effective interviewing.

Psychometric Testing

Psychometric testing is not popular within the legal recruiting world. “Less than 5 percent of the Am Law 250 currently uses assessments during the hiring process,” according to the white paper, “Assessing Lawyer Traits & Finding a Fit for Success,” by The Right Profile and JDMatch. But testing — particularly personality assessments — may provide valuable insights into applicants. In fact, Richard believes that of the psychometric testing options, personality testing is the top tool to use.

“Personality is a very stable construct,” Richard says. “People’s personalities are more genetic than learned. They stay the same for many years. If you test somebody now, it gives you actionable information long into the future.”



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**CAREN ULRICH
STACY**

*Founder, OnRamp
Fellowship and Legal
Talent Lab*

Writing Sample Requirements

Strong communication skills are invaluable for legal professionals, who must effectively communicate with clients, opposing counsel, judges and colleagues. Firms who don’t already request writing samples from their applicants should consider the value in it. Even more effective is requiring candidates to complete an in-person writing exercise during the call-back interview, which ensures that the work is entirely theirs and unedited by others.

Schiff Hardin has found success with its writing component — administered during the callback interview — which the firm added several years ago along with the panel interview. The exercise “replicate[s] a typical discrete writing project,” through a prompt with a legal question and a short legal document for reference, Brown says.

Assessment Center Involvement

Assessment centers allow firms to observe candidates in action through some type of live project or



exercise. "Employers can acquire a detailed insight into the ability, psychology and motives of candidates through applying a series of themed, interactive or situational tests held either in-house or through an independent company," according to recruitment company Michael Page's article, "How to Make Assessment Centres Work for You."

Firms currently test for likability and intellectual horsepower, but don't focus on skills like confidence, analytical skills, oral communication and writing, ownership and initiative, and passion, Stacy of OnRamp says. Firms can attain a better sense of a candidate's skills through an assessment center, which places candidates in a situation similar to what they'll be in during their first year. "You get a lot of people's values and skills in watching them do work," Stacy says. In developing an assessment center, she recommends that firms create a standard scorecard to evaluate candidates.

Compatibility Assessments

Compatibility is an important aspect of recruiting success, particularly considering the high associate attrition that plagues most law firms. NALP's recent report "2014 Update on Associate Attrition (for calendar year 2013)" notes an average associate attrition rate of 17 percent. Of the associates who left their firms, more than half departed within five or less years.

When a firm loses one-fifth of its associates, it can have a significant impact on the firm's wallet. "High law firm turnover ... coupled with high recruiting and replacement costs create a staggering annual cost of more than \$25 million for a 400-attorney firm," according to the previously mentioned white paper, "Assessing Lawyer Traits and Finding a Fit for Success."



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"We didn't plunge into this all at once. We tried it out at two to three law schools at first. After it worked, we expanded the program to include more schools."

BILL URQUHART
Partner, Quinn
Emanuel



High attrition rates make it that much more important for firms to search for the candidates who will best mesh with the firm's goals. One way to determine whether a candidate is a good fit is to ensure his or her values match not just the firm but the specific practice group, Stacy says. "I think people sometimes write it off as touchy feely, but it's one of the main reasons I've seen relationships at firms not work," she says.

Another way to assess a candidate's fit at the firm is to test it through the summer associate program. For example, Waller Lansden Dortch & Davis LLP offers summer associates a real glimpse of firm work by assigning them to formerly live matters. "We formulated it so that the summer associate would see exactly what they would be doing as a first year as well as a second- and third-year associate," says Bobby Weiss, the firm's Director of Recruiting.

Private Networking Events

Because recruiting is not a one-size-fits-all process, on-campus interviewing may not be the most effective route for every firm. An alternative to the on-campus interview process is to host private receptions for law students. One firm that has adopted this model is Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan, LLP, which throws receptions in the spring and invites prospective candidates to submit

resumes directly to the firm.

“We’ve had more than a modicum of success attracting very talented people over the years,” says Bill Urquhart, Partner at Quinn Emanuel. “However, we are always looking for ways to improve our recruiting.” He describes the receptions as an opportunity for students to gain a broader picture of the firm’s attorneys outside the office.

Technology Recruitment Methods

Firms may also turn to technology to better understand the applicant pool and broaden their reach. For example, similar to *Match.com* for dating, the service JDMatch offers law firms and law students the opportunity to connect online. Both firms and students can search for and rank each other according to preference.

“It’s really a platform or marketplace for firms to find students and students to find firms,” Stanton says. “What really drives JDMatch is it’s all about information. Firms can search for needles in a haystack like mandarin speakers or certain undergrad degrees. They can also see a video of the student if the student uploaded it.”

JDMatch and its partner The Right Profile offer a trait assessment tool developed specifically for attorneys. Among the features of this tool are hiring reports, focused on cultural fit and practice-area compatibility.

NO PERFECT SYSTEM

As mentioned earlier, no recruitment system is perfect; however, there are still plenty of methods to consider for firms that are looking to improve their hiring process.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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