

**Published in the NALP Bulletin, December 2003.**

## **Firm Fit: Who Survives**

*By Susan G. Manch*

Another fall recruiting season has come and gone. Though students are still making their final decisions, Career Services and law firm recruiting professionals are getting their heads just enough above the water to allow them a momentary glance backward to assess the efforts of students, schools, and firms once again. An extraordinary amount of attorney and administrator time and effort fuel the recruitment engine. Some firms even follow my direction and develop thoughtful selection criteria to be used in the process and train their interviewers to apply them in evaluating candidates. Yet in the end, many hiring committees fall back on the same old tired criteria to make their selections among the available candidates—grades and the relative quality of the law school attended; and the student makes his or her decision based on the perceived prestige of the firm; and both sides get off to a poor start, belying all the planning, money, time, and effort invested in the process. Okay, so regardless of the approach, your firm got a great first year class—very bright and dynamic, diverse and accomplished. What if you could get them to stay? Not forever, necessarily, but maybe another year or two. And what if they could feel good about the firm when they left? Would these outcomes be worth another look at the selection process?

We all know that 43% of associates will leave large law firms by the time they have reached their third year away from law school graduation. This is costly because associates do not begin to pay their keep until after the third year and the cost of replacing that third-year associate with a lateral hire will be \$360,000 on average. It is also costly to developing lawyers because they often leave before they have had the time to fully realize the training benefits of the work they have been doing. If both sides made better decisions in the recruiting process, these outcomes might have been avoided. This is not to say that firms or the lawyers would be well-served by having everyone stay forever, but rather to posit that having them stay one or two more years and leave with good feelings about the firm would create a positive outcome for all involved. When firms hire the right people, they are more likely to enjoy what they are doing, thrive in and become integrated into the firm community, and maintain positive feelings toward the firm if they move on, becoming life-long supporters of the firm and its lawyers.

To do a better job of recruiting, firms have to determine their own unique “fit factors.” Don’t get me wrong, assessing “firm fit” in the recruitment process and considering in making decisions about potential employers is no easy task. If it were easy, everyone would already be doing it successfully. You may even think you are doing it, but read on to make certain you have considered every angle. Defining your hiring selection criteria starts with taking a hard look at the lawyers in the firm who are both successful and satisfied, and ascertaining which attributes, behaviors, and personal qualities they share. There are generally five overarching categories of “fit” factors:

- Learning style: An individual's preferred style of learning will have a huge impact on his or her ability to be successful. Processors (those who need to read and think about information) thrive in a practice and work environment that relies on thoughtful analysis. Interactors (those who learn through discussion and discourse) will do best in team-oriented environments. Hands-on learners advance with opportunities to shadow. Combinations enjoy a multi-media approach to learning.
- Communication style: Introverts thrive in scholarly firm environments and in practices that require thoughtful, detailed work. Extroverts may get more energy from practices that rely on a team approach and work that involves discussion and interaction.
- Approach to work: Outcome-oriented individuals do well in environments that reward efficiency and practical approaches. Process-oriented individuals succeed in practices whose work focuses on maneuvering and strategy. Those with a practical approach will feel motivated by structure and clear rewards, and realistic attorneys will enjoy having candid, constructive feedback and career path options.
- Cultural values: Values can be related to work, interactions with others, or toward achieving the goals of the organization. Hiring someone whose values mesh with those of the organization should make that person feel as though he or she belongs there.
- Motivators: People can be motivated to make a particular decision or perform at a specified level by any number of things:
  - Achievement
  - Approval
  - Acquisition
  - Curiosity
  - Fear

These selection criteria are in addition to baseline 'must-have' credentials needed in order for the candidate to even be considered for employment. These can be determined by developing clear descriptions of the work requirements of individuals by year of seniority and by area of specialized practice. Having a list of core competency factors to review when approaching a hiring decision can assist firms in making quick decisions about who the final group of candidates for consideration. It may also stop interviewers from making bad calls based on personality. *"But he was so nice! I really liked him even though he didn't meet our grades cut off."* This is not to say that you shouldn't consider those somewhat outside of your screening factors, but rather to argue that it should be a completely informed decision. There should be a careful assessment of the extent to which a candidate meets these baseline factors at the very beginning so that you can make informed decisions about what you are willing to give up. Too many legal employers tell me that when they loosen the academic standards too much, the possibility for the individual's success is reduced. Only you can gauge whether your workplace environment offers the kind of individualized guidance and training that will be necessary bring this person up to the level of his/her peers or to overcome a lack of preparation.

Among your most successful lawyers, there are, no doubt, any number of personality profiles that add to the diversity of the firm's culture. Introverts and extroverts, thinkers and talkers, formal and informal, open and reserved lawyers exist in almost every firm and can all find success. The key to going beyond the baseline factors to develop tailored "firm fit" selection criteria is to first identify factors that often lead to someone failing at the firm. Sometimes looking at it 'backwards' helps clarify which qualities contribute most to success and satisfaction. For example, it may be that people who need a lot of direction don't do well or those who are too overtly ambitious. Sometimes, those who fail are those who can't play well with others or who are aloof or think too much of themselves. By identifying these less positive characteristics, a picture of the ideal candidate begins to form. It suddenly becomes clear that there are common qualities shared among your diverse, eclectic attorney population. They may value teamwork or civility. They may all care most about the excellence of the work or they may get energized by a service orientation. Commonalities will begin to emerge that will give you a picture of who you are looking for.

Motivational conditions are much harder to pinpoint in candidates and will inevitably call for skilled interviewing strategies. While a few candidates oblivious to the weight of their words will tell interviewers, *"Oh I just want to do this till my loans are paid off."* Or *"I figure if I get good experience with your firm, I can get a good in-house job in a few years."* Most people will not hand it to you on a silver platter like these folks. You will have to probe, ask thoughtful questions, and LISTEN. Often listening is the one thing interviewers forget to do because they are busying selling the firm or shaping their next question. Candidates will often say they couldn't get a word in edgewise at their own interviews. Laterals are often particularly amazed when firms fail to explore why they are searching for a new job and what they are looking for. Entry-level candidates are often asked why they chose to study law, but not how a law firm and its work fits in with their overall career interests and goals. Find out what excites them, note on which subjects their eyes light up and they ask questions that weren't carefully prepared in advance. Ask about experiences they have valued above others, outside interests and passions, and let them talk about what they hope to find in their work at the firm. These types of discussions can uncover motivational conditions and help you determine if the candidate will ultimately be satisfied in your work environment.

Even when the market is leaning to the employers' side as it is today, the best candidates have multiple options. One could also argue that in an economic slump, carefully managing the firm's investment in professional staff is paramount. For employers, developing and applying thoughtful "fit" factors in the recruiting process should focus attention on the type of information interviewers should be gathering and considering. Doing so should help to ensure that the firm makes fruitful decisions on whom precious offers should be bestowed. For Career Services professionals, making students attend carefully to these "fit factors" when considering potential employers should help to complete the equation for a more successful decision-making process.

*Susan G. Manch is a Principal in the legal management consulting firm of Shannon & Manch, LLP in Washington, DC. Her firm specializes in assisting law firms in all areas*

*of attorney development. She can be reached for questions or comments at [manch@shannonandmanch.com](mailto:manch@shannonandmanch.com).*