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TRAINING YOUR RECRUITING TEAM

By Susan G. Manch

"It's amazing to me, but as the stakes have risen, the quality of the interviews has gone down," one law school Career Services Director reported to me. And she was not alone. In an informal survey of law school career services and placement offices all over the country, I found that in the opinion of both students and administrators, the quality of on-campus interviews had decreased as the competition for the top students increased. But the stakes remain incredibly high. In the July 8, 1999 edition of *The New York Law Journal*, it was reported that White & Case had raised the bar in the New York firm salary wars by setting entry level salaries at \$110,000. This new number made me think very hard about what the placement directors had told me.

I believe the implications are twofold. As an interview skills trainer, I know a lot about poor interviewers. First, poor interviewers cannot capably select the best candidates for second round interviews. Second, poor interviewers cannot effectively sell the firm in the recruiting process. Perhaps the firms are hoping that the high salaries alone will sell the firm. But students will tell you that it is the *people*--the interviewers, who really sell the firm. When most firms are paying similar salaries, the only differentiating factor is the way in which they *feel* about the firm after the interview. Was the interviewer pleasant, respectful, and knowledgeable? Did he or she offer insights on why the firm was a good place to work, learn, or progress? Did the candidate think the questions he or she was asked reflected a knowledge of what the firm was looking for in future hires? Did the student leave the interview thinking, *"I'd like to work with that person."*?

In order for the candidate to have had such an experience, the interviewer would have needed to prepare for the interview. There would have been a discussion--probably several--among all recruiting team members about what the firm is looking for and which selection criteria should be applied in the screening process. There would have been a review of interviewing techniques, including resume review, interview planning, question development, and candidate evaluation. They would have been brainstorming on what differentiates the experience at this firm and which among its strengths should be highlighted for candidates in the recruiting process. If this is not representative of the process your recruiting team is undertaking to prepare for Fall recruiting, you may want to consider whether some training might give your team a competitive edge. The attributes of exceptional interviewers are skills which can be learned and honed.

KNOWING WHO IS SUCCESSFUL

Having a clear idea of what the firm is looking for is one of the first areas that should be addressed. The profile of the successful associate may differ for each firm. Being able to identify candidates who will fit into your culture, who will be motivated to succeed in the firm, and who have the intellectual capability to do the work is both an art and a science. Many attorneys who interview law students or laterals will

tell you that interviewing is intuitive and that they do not need formal training to teach them these basic skills. Unfortunately, many interviewers employ their intuitive art, yet neglect the more scientific process of weighing both quantitative and qualitative evidence presented by each candidate. Key factors such as suitability for private practice, cultural fit, and intangibles such as maturity and judgment are often sacrificed in interviews dedicated to intuitive responses to a candidate's personality. Thoughtful training interventions can help recruiting teams to identify and effectively use their firm's profile for success in the recruiting process.

INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

Poor interviewers do not read the resume in advance, they have few or no prepared questions, they do too much of the talking and fail to let the student describe his or her strengths, they cannot answer questions about the firm, and they frequently begin the interview by saying, "*So tell me about yourself.*"

Carrying out an effective screening interview requires preparation. Careful review of the resume directs the interview plan, focusing the attention of the interviewer on key issues that require clarification or that cannot be determined from the resume. The development of thoughtful questions in advance of the interview allows the interviewer to relax and elicit the most useful information from the candidate. No one, I repeat, *no one* can read a resume and come up with insightful questions as he or she sits in front of a candidate. What he or she *can* do is insult the student by wasting precious interview time.

Knowing how to ask questions and what not to ask are other important issues for on campus hiring teams. Poorly phrased questions or insensitive or offensive questions will end the interview on a sour note at the very least. Following up each interview with a thoughtful evaluation is also a critical skill. Giving thought to the firm's selection criteria and using them to consistently evaluate each interviewee will provide meaningful information that can be used to make smart decisions on call-backs.

SELLING THE FIRM

Money aside, what is it that would make someone want to work for your firm rather than another? What factors differentiate your firm from others in your city or in the practice areas that are your focus? These and many others are the questions that law students will be asking as they sign up for interviews this Fall. They want to make informed choices and it is in the best interests of your firm that they do so. Many lawyers who leave their law firms after only a few years do so because it was a poor match in the first place. Developing your firm's "message" is all about identifying the unique strengths, advantages, and opportunities for growth while still presenting a realistic picture of the work experience he or she will encounter. Giving students a clear idea of what it is like to practice in your firm is the best way to ensure that those who choose to come there have informed expectations.

Knowing who is successful, utilizing effective interviewing techniques, and developing a unified recruiting message are all ways to ensure that your hiring team will be successful this Fall. Training the team is the best way to develop or refresh these skills. As the stakes go up, I believe

the quality of the interviews should follow. Firms need to take active steps to protect the unprecedented investment most are making in recruiting legal talent. Providing initial training or a refresher course for all interviewers will allow the team to focus the efforts of all involved and invest their time and attention to the important task at hand. In our next survey, we hope **not** to hear that the interview quality on campus declined again in Fall 1999!

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