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Featured Employer Article

How to Effectively Interview Lateral Candidates: Pointers for Law Firms

Numerous books, articles, and training materials have been written on the subject of how to successfully interview for a job. Most of this information is geared toward the job candidate, instructing him or her to dress professionally, arrive on time, anticipate difficult questions and prepare responses, maintain eye contact, avoid slouching, and generally make the best impression on potential employers.

However, the role of the interviewer is just as important to the [success of the interview process](#). First, the goal of the interviewer is to gather enough information to properly evaluate the candidate and determine if he or she is a good fit. The interviewer's ability to accomplish this task can be the difference between an informed hiring decision and a costly mistake.

In addition, the interviewer's goal is to effectively promote his or her company in order to attract the best possible candidate for the position. In a law firm setting, today's thriving legal market has made the hiring process increasingly competitive, as firms vie for the strongest candidates in certain practice areas. For example, in Washington, DC, there is a [high demand for experienced commercial real estate](#) and [corporate associates](#) and a relatively low supply of qualified candidates. As a result, strong lateral associates in these practice areas are often in the enviable position of being able to choose between offers from several firms. Therefore, the interviewer's role in best presenting his or her firm to strong candidates is particularly crucial.

Since attorneys in private practice are trained in the practice of law rather than the art of interviewing and often have extremely demanding schedules that make it difficult for them to spend a significant amount of time preparing for interviews, it can be challenging for firms to ensure that lateral interviews are accomplished as effectively as possible. Nevertheless, there



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are some steps that the firm's recruiting department can take to help ensure the success of the interview process.

Based on the experiences of [BCG Attorney Search's legal recruiters](#) and feedback we receive from the candidates we represent, here are some pointers that we hope can help your firm and its attorneys when interviewing lateral candidates. While situations vary and all of these suggestions may not be practical in every case, we provide them as a general guideline for your firm's use.

PRIOR TO THE INTERVIEW

Provide interviewers with a detailed description of the position. In order to choose the best candidate for the job, the interviewer needs to have a clear definition of the position the firm is seeking to fill. This information is often obvious, especially if the practice group is small and specialized. However, if the position requires particularized knowledge, experience, or skill levels, and the job description is detailed and lengthy, it is helpful to provide this information to the interviewer—especially if the interviewer is a junior associate and is not as familiar with the firm's hiring needs.

Provide interviewers with detailed information on the candidate, including any cover letters submitted. Interviewers should have access to and review as much information about the candidate as possible prior to the interview. Some recruiting companies, including BCG Attorney Search, prepare detailed cover letters explaining very relevant information, such as the candidate's reasons for seeking a change, performance reviews, etc. This background information is very useful to interviewers and can provide topics for discussion during the interview.

Select the right interviewers. The firm's recruiting department may well have limited options when it comes to deciding which attorneys to include on the interview schedule. However, to the extent that there is some flexibility, it is advantageous to select those attorneys who have both the time and the desire to conduct an interview and to present the firm in the best



possible light. If an attorney is extremely overworked or stressed preparing for a trial, this stress will be apparent to the job candidate and can be off-putting. Similarly, if an attorney seems to be at a point where he or she is disenchanted with the firm or the practice of law in general, this attitude will be conveyed to the candidate. For these reasons, selecting appropriate interviewers whenever possible can be of considerable value to your firm.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

As discussed above, most attorneys are not interviewing experts and could benefit from receiving some general guidelines on how to conduct interviews. Specifically, they should be encouraged to:

Build a rapport with the candidate. At the same time that a lateral candidate is being evaluated, he or she is also evaluating the firm, its atmosphere, and its people. If a candidate feels comfortable at a firm, he or she is much more likely to look favorably upon an offer from that firm. In addition, a candidate who is at ease in an interview is much more likely to speak freely and share information that will help the interviewer in making his or her evaluation.

To that end, interviewers who are friendly, warm, and attempt to build a rapport with the candidate by continually establishing a sense of trust with him or her throughout the interview will increase the comfort level of the candidate and enhance the information-gathering process. To build a rapport, an interviewer can initially make small talk with the candidate and ask simple, close-ended questions (e.g., “Did you have any trouble finding our office?” or “How is your summer going?”) to make the candidate feel at ease.

In addition, the interviewer can identify and reflect back a candidate’s nonverbal cues. For example, if the candidate sits forward in the chair and uses his or her hands to gesture when speaking, the interviewer can follow the candidate’s lead and casually mirror (without mimicking) these movements. In this way, the interviewer can establish a rapport with the candidate and facilitate the free flow of information during the interview.



Ask open-ended questions. Open-ended questions — typically questions that begin with “why,” “how,” or “what” — are designed to allow the candidate to express themselves more fully, and enable the interviewer to gather more information on the candidate. Once the introductions are made, the interviewer should avoid posing closed questions (“Do you like practicing law?”) or leading questions (“I love working late nights, don’t you?”) and instead focus on open-ended questions in order to facilitate communication. Some examples of open-ended interview questions are:

- Why do you want to change jobs?
- What interests you about our firm?
- How did you end up specializing in ____ law?
- What are you looking for in a new position?
- Tell me about a recent case/transaction that you worked on.
- How much experience have you had mentoring junior associates?
- What are your favorite aspects of practicing law?

Interviewers who reviewed the candidate’s resume and other materials prior to the interview can also ask open-ended questions pertaining to the candidate’s specific background and achievements, which will impress the candidate by showing that the interviewer was interested in the candidate’s background.

Be a good listener. In order to learn valuable information about the candidate, the interviewer must not only ask open-ended questions; he or she must also actively listen to the candidate’s responses. Active listening includes maintaining eye contact, listening closely to what the candidate is saying, repeating what the candidate said, and asking follow-up questions.

If the interviewer speaks for 25 of the 30 minutes of the allotted interview period rather than spending a substantial amount of time listening, the candidate may come away from the interview feeling both uncertain as to how he or she did and concerned about the interviewer’s apparent lack of interest in the candidate’s work experience and accomplishments. At the



same time, the interviewer did not gather sufficient information about the candidate to make an informed judgment as to whether the candidate would be the best fit for the job. While some sharing of information by the interviewer is needed in order to promote the firm, ideally the parties will engage in a back-and-forth discussion—similar to a tennis match—that will allow both parties the opportunity to speak and exchange information.

Avoid pop quizzes. Some of our candidates have reported that they received a pop quiz about their writing sample or the statutes pertaining to their area of specialization during an interview. Unlike law students, who must endure the Socratic method of teaching while in law school, most experienced lateral candidates do not respond well to being put on the spot in this fashion and may form an unfavorable opinion of the interviewer and/or firm if this technique is employed.

Resist the urge to make a snap judgment. Studies have shown that many interviewers make a determination about a candidate very early on in the interview, often within the first few minutes. However difficult, interviewers should resist the urge to make snap judgments about candidates and instead take the time to listen and gather appropriate information before forming an opinion. A candidate who initially may not seem like the best fit could turn out to be ideal if given the chance to communicate his or her experience and strengths during the interview.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Gather comments from the interviewers as soon as possible. Interviewers should write out their notes and comments about a candidate as soon as the interview is completed in order to memorialize their thoughts in the most accurate manner. The firm's recruiting department can encourage prompt return of evaluations by requesting them back within 24 hours of the interview or providing an incentive for those who return their evaluations the soonest. Doing so will assist the firm in compiling information on a candidate and will also reduce delays in following up with particularly strong candidates, who may perceive any delay on the part of a firm as a lack of interest.



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Ask the legal recruiter for feedback. If a lateral candidate came to your firm via a legal recruiter, the legal recruiter will contact the candidate shortly after the interview for a debriefing. During these conversations, candidates typically provide very frank assessments of the interview and their interviewers. This information can prove invaluable to firms in determining how better to improve their interview process. This is especially true when firms are having difficulty filling a particular position and can't figure out why. In these situations, ask your legal recruiter for feedback.

In conclusion, we hope that the above pointers will help to make your firm's interview process more effective and successful. If you have any questions, please [feel free to contact the BCG Attorney Search office in your region](#) and we will be happy to further assist you.

Our mission is to meet or exceed every law firm's unique requirements and ensure they are succeeding and winning with BCG Attorney Search