

Behavioral Interviewing Techniques to Help Your Law Firm Get Great Laterals

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Has your firm been hiring new associates who seem to meet your criteria in the hope that they'll learn and improve and still be with the firm when its time to make partnership decisions? Rather than hoping, now may be the time to identify the competencies your law firm needs. Then you can teach lawyer/interviewers to uncover the desired behaviors that will create a legal workforce that can develop those competencies and is reliable, productive, and stable.

[The first step is called behavioral interviewing.](#) It is a coordinated system for identifying the competencies you want in your law firm.

[But before you can teach lawyers to interview for the job behaviors you're seeking,](#) consult with the people at your firm who are closely involved with professional development, performance reviews, promotion to partnership, and outplacement.

Step one: Look at the big picture. [How successful have you been at hiring lawyers who develop into productive members of your firm?](#) [Look at the traits of your most productive associates who are now moving toward partnership.](#) BCG Attorney Search also suggests reviewing information on lawyers who have left your firm: Does the firm miss them? Why did they leave? Consider: Has your firm held onto its best associates? Were the ones who left those with unproductive attitudes and behaviors? [Did the firm cause productive lawyers to leave?](#)

Step two: Train interviewers on behaviors and attitudes. [Research shows firms must train interviewers to seek out in candidates the attitudes and behaviors they've identified in the successful lawyers at their office.](#) Then their questions will uncover whether the candidates will be a good fit. [Since criteria based on behaviors have been proven at least as valid in predicting performance as law school credentials and resumes,](#) your goal in this training is twofold: (1) Help your firm's interviewers see if there is a match between the behaviors sought and the behaviors candidates describe or exhibit during interviews; and (2) offer interviewers a clear and concise method of determining which candidates should receive callback invitations or offers based on those behavioral criteria.

Step three: Link the firm's hiring criteria from your candidate evaluation form to the behavioral competencies and patterns you've identified. Most firms still rely on descriptions of behaviors, but there's a better way to proceed. The following exercises are useful:

[Meet with the junior partners in each practice group.](#) Ask each to think of the most successful associate with whom they work and to describe, in short phrases, what attitudes toward work and what work-related behaviors make this person such a valuable member of the group. Write down the comments, then ask the group to think about which behavioral traits are most important and circle those traits on the list. Repeat this exercise with senior partners and senior associates. Key: Select as participants only those who have shown a talent for working with junior lawyers.

Meet with lawyers who are responsible for evaluating associates' work and conducting performance reviews. Lead a discussion about the attitudes and behaviors of junior lawyers who were asked to leave the firm because of poor performance. Do not simply accept the phrase "not smart enough." Probe further by asking group members to name specific work attitudes/behaviors that impeded performance.

Step four: Organize and use the descriptive information you gathered to reevaluate the hiring criteria on your candidate evaluation form. Replace generic words like "intelligence" and "motivation" with more specific

expressions from your focus group list. Use phrases like "takes initiative/" "seeks additional responsibility/" "responds to criticism/" "organizes time and work/" which will help your interviewers understand what valuable behaviors the firm needs from new recruits.

Step five: Disseminate, debate, and reread resumes. Even [converting] to a more coordinated recruiting/retention system requires this training component, so don't skip it. [Lawyers need to understand why they are being asked to move from ad hoc interviewing to a more rational approach.](#)

Step six: Train your lawyers to examine a resume with an eye on your new criteria. Teach and remind all of your interviewers to ask candidates why they've done what they have done and to try and surmise why candidates have included or excluded certain resume facts. Interviewers should also develop their own questions that will convince them of the training, credentials, and--most important--the thinking, attitudes, and behaviors of candidates that associates who are excelling in private practice and at your firm also possess. Remember: Not all smart law students belong in a high-pressure arena. The ones who succeed must be able to manage themselves, although they may have the same array of operational styles as exist in your most successful associates and partners.

Step seven: Train your interviewers. Your plan can be loose or semi-structured, depending on your firm's culture. Some firms ask interviewers to discuss with the team behaviors drawn from one portion of a resume in a certain sequence. Others specify the questions they want asked at on-campus interviews or allow only members of the recruiting committee to participate in call-backs. Many define valid behavioral criteria and train lawyers in a "behavioral questioning style," but prescribe no questioning pattern.

Questioning styles should mirror the firm's management style. Key: Teach your lawyers to generate conversations with candidates about how they behaved in a variety of work-related situations. What did they learn from those experiences, and how do they feel about the outcomes (e.g., angry, proud, relieved, etc.)? Ask candidates to describe a setback or a time when the rules changed: How did everyone on the team handle the situation? What result did they get? Was it a team result or an individual victory?

Note; BCG Attorney Search is reluctant to offer [specific questions](#)--you don't want all of your interviewers to use the same ones. Interviewers must learn to assess the genuineness and credibility of candidates and whether the behaviors they have described match those of your most successful new associates. Since listening is crucial for this, you may want to consider a separate training session to beef up interviewers' listening skills.

The bottom line: If you and your recruiting committee have accepted too many mediocre hires or too many lawyers who don't fit in with your firm, incorporating behavioral interviewing into your recruiting regimen should give you better results, BCG Attorney Search believes. "The ability of your firm to cultivate clients and deliver service depends on your interviewers' acumen in talent identification." As does the future of your firm!

See the following articles for more information:

[Top 23 Law Firm Interview Tips: How to Excel in Law Firm Interviews](#)

[21 Major Interview Mistakes to Avoid at All Costs](#)

[The Best Way to Prepare for a Job Search and Interviews](#)

[How to Talk About Other Interviews in Your Interviews](#)

[How to Answer the Tell Me About Yourself Interview Question](#)

[How to Answer the Do You Have Any Questions for Me Interview Question](#)

[Had a Great Interview But Have Got No Response to My Thank-You Emails](#)

[What Does It Mean if I Haven't Heard Anything Back from an Application/Interview in a Couple Weeks?](#)

[What to Wear to a Lunch Interview?](#)

[How to Effectively Interview Lateral Candidates: Pointers for Law Firms](#)

The Interview Post-Mortem: Don't Forget Your Thank You Notes!

The Secret to Effectively Sharing Concerns about Your Current Employer without Committing the Most Common Interview Blunder

How to Conduct Yourself During a Lunch Interview

Interested in Learning More About Legal Hiring? Read the Definitive Guide:

[How to Hire a Legal Recruiter for Your Law Firm: How Law Firms Recruit Attorneys Using Legal Recruiters](#)