

Law Firm Administration A Special Report

Helpful Hints for the Hunt

Finding the best candidate means using your headhunter effectively.



BY DANIEL BINSTOCK
AND CAREY BERTOLET

You've received a call from the managing partner in your firm's intellectual property practice who needs to hire three new associates, pronto.

You, as the law firm recruiting manager, need to come up with candidates for him as soon as possible. Although you hear the urgency in his voice, you are also aware that he is unlikely to compromise his high standards.

What do you do? Aside from sending out an e-mail to the firm's staff and running some advertisements, you'll probably want to call on a headhunter, too.

If so, here are some suggestions that will help you get the most out of your headhunter. The result will be a more-focused search, the most appropriate candidates, a higher rate of offers being accepted, and an easier process overall.

HELPFUL HINTS

The best way to demonstrate what works best is by offering up a list of suggestions, followed by examples of "unhelpful," "adequate," and "excellent" responses in that eternal search for great lawyers.

1. Let us know your working style (and what drives you nuts).

While many headhunters may think they understand what it is like to work in a law firm recruiting department, most have absolutely no idea of the daily pressures and multitudes of inquiries you deal with. As headhunters, we routinely hear horror stories from law firms about over-eager and inexperienced headhunters who believe, for example, that it is appropriate to follow up on a submission every single day, beginning the day after a candidate is presented. What do you do?

a. Unhelpful approach: Don't respond to inquiries, and hope that the person stops annoying you with "Hi, just checking in" phone calls and e-mails.

b. Excellent approach: Explain your preferences upfront with a brief phone conversation or e-mail. For example, do you appreciate follow-up calls, or do they bother you? Do you like inquiries by e-mail or phone? Submissions by e-mail or fax? What information do you like to have right from the start with your submissions? Taking the time to explain this information early on will save you a lot of time and future headaches. The search consultant will also appreciate knowing this information as well.

2. Call to discuss your important searches with the headhunters you use regularly.

Communicating your needs on specific searches can be done in any number of ways. Many firms provide the search firms they favor with a list of open searches on a regular basis.

a. Adequate request: Often, when the firm begins a new search, it's added to a list of "open searches" and sent out by e-mail to certain search firms as an immediate update, or with the next scheduled circulation of law firm recruiting needs.

b. Excellent request: A phone call to a search firm or consultant you respect can serve to highlight an immediate need or a particular piece of necessary information that might have otherwise been overlooked. For example, you might name what types of candidates have not previously worked out or specific "off the record" information that may not be appropriate for wide distribution. Moreover, by receiving a call, the headhunter will put that search at the top of the pile because you've identified him as someone you want to work with. No one receives a personal phone call about a search if the firm isn't committed to filling the spot.

3. Clearly define the scope of your search.

Effectively defining the scope of your search includes specifying the (1) ideal and "in a perfect world" candidate; (2) the "not perfect, but we're still willing to consider" candidate; and (3) the "please don't even bother" candidate. While you may prefer to be a bit more broad in your advertisements so as not to eliminate

potential candidates, you can afford to be much more specific with your search consultant.

a. Adequate request: “We are looking for patent associates (electrical engineering background) with 3 to 6 years’ experience.”

b. Excellent request: “We are looking for a patent prosecution-only associate with 3-6 years of experience prosecuting electrical patent applications. (Must have experience with semi-conductors and liquid crystal display technology.) This candidate should also be familiar with patent licensing issues, and Chinese language skills would be a bonus. (The department has numerous clients from China.) The ideal candidate will have an advanced degree in electrical engineering and both law firm and PTO experience. We would still be open to considering candidates with only undergraduate degrees in electrical engineering, or only law firm experience. However, we will not consider candidates without prior law firm experience. Our IP practice is quite picky with grades, so ideal candidates should be from top 20 law schools and in the top 30 percent of their class. We would still be open to considering candidates from other Tier 1 law schools so long as they are in the top 20 to 30 percent of their class.”

Having a standard firm-approved “search intake form” that requests all the essential information is very helpful in streamlining the process and making sure everybody is aware of precisely what type of information is needed. If your firm does not yet have one, suggest having one created with input from the recruiting committee.

HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY

4. Give honest and specific feedback regarding the candidates you interview.

Because firms and practice groups are so different, the same candidate going on several interviews will typically get quite different responses from different firms.

Obviously, for you to give feedback on every candidate we present would take up too much time and is just not practical. However, if a candidate has had an interview, providing specific feedback can help us create a better and more sharply defined template to use for future candidates.

For example, if a candidate interviews and gets an offer, let the headhunter know what you liked about the candidate so that we can keep this information in mind for future candidates. Likewise, if you decide to pass on a candidate after an interview, any specific feedback you can provide (regarding the candidate’s personality, experience, etc.) will allow us to better assess future candidates and whether they would be a likely fit.

a. Adequate response: “Unfortunately, we are unable to bring Joe Smith in for further interviews at this time.”

b. Excellent response: “Unfortunately, we are unable to bring Joe Smith in for further interviews at this time. We thought his experience and credentials were right on, but the attorneys in the finance group noted that he did not seem genuinely enthusiastic about our practice. This group is very collegial and really wants to hire somebody who is extremely enthusiastic and committed.”

5. If a candidate has interviewed, keep the lines of communication open even if you are not in the position to make an offer immediately.

One major roadblock in effective recruiting is losing the candidate because too much time has elapsed between the interview and offer stages. There are many perfectly good reasons the firm may have for this delay, many of them simply administrative. Nonetheless, from a candidate’s perspective (where two days seem like two weeks), delay is almost always interpreted as a lack of interest and almost always lowers the candidate’s view of the firm. One of the search consultant’s roles is to encourage a firm to move the process along while managing the candidate’s expectations and explaining the realities of the recruitment process.

a. Adequate communication: Tell the headhunter that there is no information to communicate, and that the firm will be in touch when they know whether they will or will not extend an offer.

b. Excellent communication: “Our door is open.” Although it is frustrating to return calls to a headhunter wanting to know whether the candidate will receive an offer when you don’t know the answer, keeping the lines of communication open is extremely important. Why? We have seen numerous candidates have unnecessary reservations about a firm during the post-offer stage due to the false impression that “the firm waited so long, they must not be very interested in me.”

The best thing to do for a quality candidate who may have to wait for an offer? Tell your recruiter to keep that candidate “warm,” and keep yourself available, even if you have nothing of substance to report. Also, if there is an administrative reason for the delay, let the headhunter know this as well. Therefore, the recruiter can assure the candidate that the lines of communication are open, that the process is moving along, and provide an appropriate explanation when necessary.

A BIGGER PICTURE

6. Let us know how we are doing over the long term.

Often overlooked in the day-to-day details is long-term feedback for search firms and individual recruiters. Taking the time to reflect long-term on your relationship with a search firm can increase the service you receive in the short term.

a. Adequate approach: “We’ve used you before, so we wanted to let you know of a new search.”

b. Excellent approach: “You know, we hired John through you last year. He’s doing extremely well. He jumps in on every file and has really shown initiative, and that’s a big deal here.” At the same time, the following is also an excellent way to communicate: “We worked with you on a search last year and we felt that you were sending too many unrelated résumés during that time.” This kind of long-term feedback (as opposed to feedback on an individual résumé or interview) is useful because it allows the search consultant to develop a template to do business with you the way you want it done.

Remember, you can directly influence how effectively a search consultant acts on your behalf. While it may take a little bit more time upfront to put these tips to use, we guarantee that you will be rewarded over the long term.

Daniel Binstock is managing director of BCG Attorney Search’s D.C. office. Carey Bertolet is managing director of BCG Attorney Search’s New York City office.