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In hiring, the trend is value, not pedigree

On the Job



By Nancy Mackevich Glazer

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Were you ever disappointed after hiring a new or lateral attorney? That question probably inspired a knowing laugh, right?

Typically, there are many different reasons why a new hire may fall short. Usually, it's about an attorney's overselling her book of business. Sometimes, it's about her work ethic or a lack of fit.

Often, there's a disconnect between a candidate's stellar pedigree translating into stellar client service. It happens. Truthfully, I'm weary continually asking the emperor to get dressed. However, it looks like he may be buying pants soon.

Remember the market contractions seven years ago and how one's school or law review article didn't matter when it came to hiring and retention? If you didn't contribute to your firm's bottom line or provide other value, you were simply shown the door.

Since 2014's fourth quarter, the legal job market has been more actively finding itself again for many reasons. It's still not the same as pre-2008, and attorneys must continue to be innovative, even entrepreneurial, about their professional courses.

To me, it's more exciting in 2015, mainly because a job seeker can better control his own professional path, not just trip over it.

Hiring in 2015

As a result of hiring disappointments, here's what's now starting to trend in the market — finally. (It's hard to muffle an "I told you so!") Collective experience is showing that lawyers are beginning to lower their noses.

Stuck with bad hires, lawyers have begun to shift their valuing of a candidate's pedigree to other criteria: The ability to work both in teams and independently; empathy for colleagues and clients; resilience; leadership abilities; good decision-making, and solid communication skills.

Some of these "soft skills" or "emotional intelligence" are difficult to teach, but they are proving to be vital.

With this shift in thinking, legal interviews have developed from half-hour chats and unstructured conversations over meals to more coordinated, behavioral dialogues with several firm members.

Interviewing may include group projects and a writing assignment. Candidates are now being tested with the kinds of problems that attorneys regularly solve.

Attorneys may grouse over the time and energy required in this hiring model. However, think about the bad feelings created when a new hire doesn't pan out so well — the embarrassment, too. Maybe exerting this kind of time and energy on the front end of hiring may help predict better results.

As you can guess, some candidates who are tested in these exercises — who looked great on paper or at lunch — may now show some true colors.

Chicago's Schiff, Hardin LLP has become a leader in its thinking about law student and lateral hiring. Schiff, Hardin worked with Indiana University law professor William Henderson's Lawyer Metrics LLC to develop structured behavioral panel interviews for hiring.

Schiff, Hardin's leadership felt that a panel interview format — four partners asking questions about the candidates' actual prior experience solving real world problems, juggling competing commitments and collaborating with people with different work styles — would help the firm better identify candidates who will be successful long-term.

The firm also implemented a writing exercise that tests candidates' ability to respond thoughtfully and accurately with empathy, to a layperson's legal problem.

Together, Schiff, Hardin's panel interview and writing exercise help the firm identify candidates who have the full complement of skills necessary for long-term success.

Schiff's professional development partner, [Lisa A. Brown](#), reports that this model demonstrates how pedigree and excellent grades, while important, don't necessarily predict an attorney's success.

Brown asserts that "Schiff Hardin is looking to hire candidates who will be (or are) great lawyers, not just excellent law students. If you have all the intellect and raw analytical skills, but lack empathy, judgment or the ability to make decisions in the face of incomplete information, you're of little value to a client trying to solve a real world problem."

The Harvard Business Review, too, recently reported that major corporations have embraced these hiring concepts, increasingly demanding that their counsel understand their businesses, be active members of the overall team, and be creative problem-solvers.

In selecting outside counsel, the magazine states "General counsel are moving away from the most pedigreed law firms and instead focusing on value." The firms they vet are evaluated on "quality, client-service, expertise, efficiency, innovation and attitude." The survey of 88 major companies reports that 74 percent of GCs were willing to hire less-pedigreed law firms, looking more to competency and value.

Graduating from a highly ranked law school will always be viewed favorably. If you're hiring, however, you must consider whether a candidate can truly understand and help your clients.

While practically minded hiring practices may take time to implement, I'm hoping the emperor likes his new outfit.

Special thanks to career counselor and admired competitor, Shauna Bryce of Bryce Legal for showcasing The Harvard Business Review's findings in her weekly newsletter and sharing them with Legal Launch LLC.

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