

The Art of Communication

GOAL-DRIVEN INTERVIEWS

BY JAY SULLIVAN

As you advance in your legal career, you'll find your role at the firm changing. Although your job initially is to crank out billable hours, after a few years part of your job becomes helping to plan for the firm's future. At large and small firms alike, this often means helping to hire new attorneys. When you participate in the on-campus interview process or conduct call-back interviews, don't settle for simply having a pleasant conversation with a candidate. Every hour spent interviewing is an hour not spent billing time. Make sure your interview time is used wisely.

Effective interviews require a game plan. Overall, the plan is to determine if the candidate is able to do the job, is willing to do the job and is a match for the firm. Successful candidates must be all three. The plan also requires dividing your time between finding



out about the candidate and helping the candidate get to know your firm. Effective communication skills are needed for both parts.

Is the Candidate Able?

Your firm's recruiting committee should identify three key skills that the firm decides are most important for new candidates. It's important that everyone at the firm focus on the same three skills so you can compare candidates based on the same criteria. Although clearly there are more than three skills needed to be a successful attorney, in a 20-minute on-campus interview or a 30-minute call back, you will not have time to delve into more than three skills.

Once the firm has determined the skills it's seeking, your job is to scan the resume and determine places in the candidates'

work history, educational experience and personal life where you can ask questions that will help determine if the candidate has the required skill set. Assume that if the candidate has never demonstrated a skill in the past, she is unlikely to do so in the future.

Let's say, for example, that the firm decides that in order to succeed associates must work hard, pay attention to detail, and communicate well. (We'll leave out intelligence since that will be gauged mostly through a candidate's transcript.) The firm has now set the guidelines regarding what the candidate is to be probed about.

Start with hard-working. Is there anywhere in the resume that you can ask questions to determine if the candidate has ever worked hard? If she worked as a waitress in a busy diner throughout college, you know she can work hard. If she was a paralegal at a large firm for three years, ask questions about what she did in that role—how she approached her work, what type of hours she was expected to bill, how she dealt with too much work on her plate.

If she didn't work at all in college and then took off a year to travel before going to law school, she may turn out to

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be a very hard worker, but you have no reason to think so from her work history. And when comparing her to a candidate who has clearly worked hard in the past, you have to give greater weight to the other candidate.

Evidence of hard work could come from the candidate's personal life as well. If the candidate doesn't have significant work history, but she ran a marathon, you know she knows how to work hard toward a goal.

Is the Candidate Willing?

Once it's been determined the candidate has worked hard in her last job, get her to tell stories about particular instances where she had to buckle down to get the job done. Pay attention to her tone of voice, her enthusiasm, her energy when she tells the story. Was working hard the most miserable experience of her life, or was it a source of pride? If she hated doing it then, she is unlikely to want to work hard now.

When inquiring about a candidate's experiences, dig deep. If you accept surface answers, you won't have a feel for what the candidate actually did in prior jobs.

Resumes present high-level views about a candidate's experience, and

job titles tell little about a candidate's activities. Start by asking open-ended questions about the candidate's experience. Listen carefully to her answers. Follow-up questions will present themselves. Don't be afraid to probe into details.

While you should definitely plan initial questions around specifics on the resume, follow-up questions should be in response to the answers the candidate provides.

A Match for the Firm?

The last prong is where your gut comes in. Does your gut tell you the candidate will fit in well with you and your colleagues?

Firms thrive when they have diversity, and diversity comes in many forms. Nevertheless, firms actively promote their "culture" to candidates. If the candidate doesn't seem to fit the firm culture, she is unlikely to thrive.

If the culture is buttoned-up reserved, for example, a free-spirit candidate may not mix well. If the culture is bare-knuckled and aggressive, a demure candidate is unlikely to have a positive experience.

Part of your job during the interview is to market your firm to the candidate.

Plan to spend at least five minutes talking about the firm. The recruiting committee should provide a list of important firm attributes.

However, telling the candidate, "the firm has a very collegial atmosphere" because it says so on the marketing sheet is less helpful than telling the candidate about an instance when you were stuck on a project and a couple of other attorneys or support professionals came to your rescue. The stories you relate during an interview are crucial to helping the candidate get to know the firm.

Given the investment of otherwise-billable time toward interviewing, the process should have structure and focus.

By applying effective listening skill, probe a candidate about her ability and uncover her willingness to use those skills. By relating personal stories and reflecting on the candidate's stories, determine if the candidate is a good match for the firm.

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