

TECHNOFEATURE: HOW TO RECRUIT AN ASSISTANT FOR YOUR LAW PRACTICE

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SYNOPSIS

You need to hire an Assistant, but of all the resumes you receive how do you choose the best person for the job? In this article, legal technology consultant Pat Nemish discusses key items to look for and important questions to ask when interviewing and evaluating a potential Assistant.

This article contains 1,157 words.

INTRODUCTION

Hiring the right Assistant (or Secretary) is one of the most important operational decisions you will make for your law office. When you fill the position with the right person your firm moves forward. Not choosing the right person can result in lost opportunities or worse. At the very least, when an Assistant leaves it upsets the flow and normalcy of your office operations until that void is filled.

The interview process should be a carefully planned strategy, and you must PREPARE for it! The thought and effort you put into preparing for the interview will be well worth it.

CORE COMPETENCIES

Past behavior is the best predictor of future performance. A behavioral recruiting process provides critical information about the candidate's past performance and accomplishments.

You want to identify his/her Core Competencies – skills necessary to achieve an effective performance level in the role of your Assistant.

One interview approach you can take is to ask a series of questions, targeted at each of the Core Competencies listed below. The other involves in-depth probing questions with you actively listening for clues which provide evidence that the Assistant possesses the necessary skills.

Core Competencies:

- Communication skills
- Delivering Results
- Interpersonal Skills
- Use of Initiative
- Planning and Organizing
- Analytical and/or Strategic Thinking
- Building relationships
- Developing Others
- Team Work

TEN QUESTIONS

You'll find a list of 20 questions below from which you should choose your favorite TOP TEN. Many of these questions use the STAR method (Situation, Task, Action, Result).

During the interview take notes. The answers to these questions will give you insight about the person's qualifications and whether they will be a good fit for your firm.

- What do you like most about being an Assistant, and what are your career aspirations?
- What types of job responsibilities do you find to be most rewarding? Why?
- What types of job responsibilities do you find to be most frustrating? Why?

- How much direct contact have you had with clients? By phone, in-person?
- How do you deal with difficult or demanding attorneys/co-workers/clients? Describe a situation.
- What kinds of legal documents have you prepared, i.e. pleadings, motions, interrogatories, etc.?
- If you were given a handwritten list of 50 names and addresses, along with a letter that needed to be sent to each, how would you complete the task? Which technologies, if any, would you use?
- To what extent have you used electronic calendaring/docketing systems? Spreadsheets, Presentation programs, _____? (Fill in the blanks pursuant to your firm's specific needs.)
- How do you feel about entering an attorney's time in a billing program? What billing programs are you familiar with and how long have you used them?
- Describe a situation when you had to take directions from several people at the same time.
- Tell me about a specific occasion when you conformed to a policy even though you did not agree with it.
- Tell me about a time when your employer was unavailable and you had to solve an immediate problem. What did you do and what was the outcome?
- Tell me about a decision you made that your employer disagreed with. How did you handle it?
- What type of management style do you prefer (hands-on, frequent supervision, minimal supervision, etc.) and why?
- Tell me about a project you have been responsible for and how you organized the necessary paperwork, tasks, goals, etc.
- Describe a day when you were faced with multiple interruptions and had to assist in covering an additional position. Tell me how you managed your day to accomplish your work.
- When you delegate assignments to others, how do you keep track of their progress?
- How have you improved or streamlined office procedures resulting a more efficiently run office?
- Describe any projects in which you've demonstrated your supervisory skills. How would the people you supervise describe your management style?
- In what ways have you assisted your colleagues with their work when they needed help?

REFERENCE SHEETS

In addition to these questions, prepare for the interview by creating the following reference sheets for yourself:

1. A list of Core Competencies related to the Assistant position. Include oral and written communications, interpersonal skills (working directly with clients and staff personnel, multi-tasking skills (meeting deadlines), and technical skills.
2. A list of specific skills necessary to accomplish what you expect the person to do. Include specific computer software experience, organizational skills, supervisory skills (optional), knowledge of legal processes, basic office skills (handling of mail, familiarity with office machines, etc.).
3. A Job Description detailing all of the responsibilities and duties related to an Assistant's role in your firm. Explain reporting relationships.
4. An Evaluation Matrix Form. On a scale from 1-10, rate each Assistant using the Matrix and base your evaluation upon the content of their answers, their delivery, overall appearance, and level of enthusiasm. Set a Level of Importance for each skill you require. For example, technical skills are very important but may only be secondary to organizational skills or the knowledge of law processes. Perhaps you need an

Assistant with a warm, engaging personality and telephone manner because of the amount of contact he/she will have with your clients.

In addition to job experience and technical skills, determine if the person is a good fit in terms of personality and character traits. Get feedback from others in your firm who have interviewed or met the candidate. You want the right person for the right job. Here is where your judgment is crucial.

SELLING THE FIRM

During the interview, provide an overview of your firm and your practice, as well as outline your expectations. Be personable and show the Assistant around your office and introduce him/her to colleagues and support staff. Allow enough time for this! Give the person the opportunity to ask questions about you and your firm. A well-prepared candidate should have questions they wish to present to you.

Not only are you evaluating out your next Assistant but they are evaluating you as a possible employer. The more information you can share, the better chance of a good employer/employee fit!

THANK YOU NOTE

One of the factors that carries some weight when choosing your Assistant is whether they have taken the time to send you a thank you note after the interview. This gesture indicates that they are professional, and is a person who follows up -- excellent qualities that can be assets to your firm.

CONCLUSION

Believe it or not, interviews can be quite enjoyable.

Remember, you have control over the success of the interview. Don't allow distractions or interruptions (turn your mobile phone off!), send your calls to voicemail or to your receptionist or current assistant, and focus completely on the job candidate. It is not only a courtesy to that person, but it will result in a better hiring outcome.

Finding the best Assistant is not a matter of luck ... it's a matter of preparation.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pat Nemish is a Certified Independent Consultant (CIC) who is qualified to train legal professionals in the use of LexisNexis, Time Matters/Billing Matters, and PCLaw. Her firm, Mellitz & Associates <<http://www.mellitzconsulting.com>>, serves clients nationwide and has offices in St. Louis, MO and San Francisco, CA.

Pat also devotes her time and energy to fund-raising activities. She solicits support for various animal protection and environmental agencies.

Pat is the proud Adoptive Parent of a 5 year-old snow leopard, Arctic, who lives in a safe haven for abused and neglected big cats at the Center for Animal Research and Education (C.A.R.E.) in Bridgeport, TX.

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