



Large and small businesses commonly ask candidates for a wide range of jobs to take one or more employment tests to gauge their interests, evaluate their intelligence, examine their personalities and measure their skills. Law firms, however, usually hire young lawyers differently.

Consider, for example, how that process is handled by Lindabury,

McCormick, Estabrook & Cooper P.C., a mid-sized general practice firm with offices in Philadelphia, central New Jersey and New York City. Anne S. Burris is a senior associate at the firm and is its hiring associate. She says Lindabury does not use any kind of test when recruiting its associates. Instead, the firm relies on its lawyers to determine who should be asked to join.

The Art of Talent Spotting

By Steven A. Meyerowitz

Find out how the people who do the hiring identify and evaluate legal talent

As many firms do, Lindabury recruits at several law schools and receives numerous resumes from law students or recent grads. The first step in the process is examining resumes to find the top candidates. "When you look at a resume, you want to see somebody who has done something a bit unusual. You want a self-starter, someone who has headed up a project and is not bored with it," Burris notes.

The firm interviews 30 to 40 law students a year and selects about three of them for its summer associates program. After seeing those students over a summer, it may

decide to make offers to one or more of them, or none of them, for the following September. Thus, one of the key elements to being hired as a new attorney at Lindabury is getting into its summer program.

The firm, of course, asks about grade-point averages. But, Burris says, "we also look to things they did in law school and before." For example, Lindabury looks favorably at law students who took time off between college and law school, which can mean they have a certain "maturity." In addition, the firm is positively inclined toward judicial clerks, who not only have likely passed the bar already but typically

are also able to demonstrate a certain maturity.

The interview process at Lindabury stems from its view that "we have an unusual culture," Burris says. "I've always been impressed by the collegial environment at this firm and the amazing cohesiveness here. We have a lot of humanistic traits in common." During an interview, the candidate sits in a room with five attorneys at a time. The candidate can see what the lawyers in the firm are like and that "we are casual, we kid each other and we talk about the law and things other than the law." Burris says the firm's lawyers

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demonstrate that “we all get along and are team players and we are not looking for a person to sit in an office with the door closed.” Simply put, she declares, the interviewing lawyers are seeking a person “who, in a one-hour or one-hour-and-20-minute interview, clicks with us.” In Burris’ view, “if you got through law school, you can be a lawyer. The question is, can you be a lawyer in our environment?”

There are certain characteristics that the firm considers important. For instance, Burris says, the way the candidate speaks is crucial. If a candidate “cannot put together a coherent sentence, if every other word is ‘like,’ ‘dude’ or ‘you know,’” the interviewing lawyers are not going to want that person to stand before a judge as a representative lawyer from their firm.


Candidates for an attorney position at Lindabury should be “interactive,” according to Burris. In her view, it is important for candidates to “show enthusiasm, get excited, tell good stories and want to share.”

They should also be “polished, but not practiced.” They

should show that they have been thinking about the firm and its people and practice. “If they come in and do not know about your firm already, that’s a bad sign,” she says. With law firm Web sites and the Internet making so much information available, candidates should take the time “to look into the firm and remember what they learn.” All law schools tell law students to “research the firm and find out who you are interviewing with.” Burris asks: If they are “not listening to their school’s career-services advisers, who will they listen to?”

Other firms seem to follow the same general procedures Lindabury uses. At larger firms, it is the same process, but on a different scale.

Laurie S. Lenigan, director of legal recruiting for Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney P.C., a national law firm with offices throughout the United States, including in Pittsburgh, Harrisburg and Philadelphia, has run her firm’s summer program for more than a decade. She says Buchanan Ingersoll receives 5,000 resumes a year for the summer program, conducts about 300 interviews at 23 law schools annually and asks between 80 to



100 law students to come to the firm's offices for interviews, from which it will select 20 to 25 summer associates.

"When we recruit, we look for the complete package," Lenigan states. The firm considers law students' grades, but Lenigan says, "We are not grade snobs." Her firm also appreciates prior work experience. For example, it's a plus for intellectual property lawyers who have degrees in appropriate subjects such as organic chemistry and who have worked as engineers. Also important to the firm is whether law students "have traveled or taken time off between their undergraduate experience and law school," which Lenigan believes can lead to becoming a "mature, sensible" person. Moreover, she says, Buchanan Ingersoll believes that it is important to see what candidates "do in their community" because the firm's lawyers "all give back."

Lenigan concedes that, "for a law student, that is a lot to ask," but she says that lawyers at her firm are "stellar people" and that newly hired attorneys must be of that mold.

A lot of what law firms look for in their candidates are things they can learn. That is not necessarily a bad thing, according to Karen Katz, a business development executive at Mintz Levin Cohn Ferris Glovsky and Popeo P.C. in Boston who has worked at the Boston University School of Law career center.

"These days," Katz observes, "more and more law schools have specialized career programs because people are thinking earlier and earlier about where they want to spend their careers." Candidates for attorney positions in law firms are told that firms look for people who are "not afraid to ask questions" and who have the "confidence to know what they know and what they do not know."

Still, firms can learn to see what kind of candidate a person is despite the coaching. They should look to see how a candidate "acts and interacts in a group situation, such as at a law school alumni reception or when the firm invites a group of students back for interviews, to gauge the candidate's confidence level," Katz says.

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It is one thing for a law student to be told to ask questions; it is another to know how to ask the right kinds of questions. Lawyers and interviewers can determine whether candidates are well prepared and whether they have actually thought about what they were going to ask. Katz points out that a great question would be how a new statute, such as the Pension Protection Act of 2006, could affect a firm’s employee benefits practice. This demonstrates an awareness of current legal developments, an understanding of the firm’s work and an ability to think about the significance of legal news on the firm’s practice. “Thought provoking questions show that the students are thinking and they are interested in the firm,” Katz says.

By the same token, Katz says that it is important for the interviewing lawyers and staff to ask significant questions of the students they are interviewing. “Look at people’s resumes and look at what they have done,” she says. An interviewer might ask, “I see you were a resident assistant as an undergrad. What did you do?” Katz says that “why” questions — such as, “Why did you select GW Law School?” — tend to put people on the defensive, so some interviewers tend to avoid them. She says, how-

ever, that lawyers who will be successful have confidence and “shouldn’t freak out when asked, ‘Why did you do it that way?’ ”

Whether law firms will adopt more “scientific” methods of recruitment in the future remains to be seen. As much as they are moving more and more toward a business model and away from the ideal of a learned profession, with growing numbers of firms now having marketing departments and chief operating officers, the practice of law is still a collegial activity, requiring personal interactions and subjective judgments. Those characteristics will undoubtedly continue to influence the recruitment process. Anne Burriss of Lindabury recognizes that some changes might occur in the future in the way her firm hires its attorneys but emphatically declares, “We do not want to change our culture.” ☸

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