

LAW OFFICE ADMINISTRATOR™

Which job candidate is the best choice?

RELY FIRST ON INTUITION, SAYS MARY E. ZOVE, CLM

Stay away from the numbers when evaluating job candidates. Hiring is not an exact science.

The resume “is just a piece of paper that gets somebody in the door,” says **MARY E. ZOVE, CLM**, of Smart Practice LLC, a Springhouse, PA, company that provides administrative and management services to law firms. Zove is also a former law administrator.

Rely more on instinct. It plays “an amazing part” in the hiring process.

She uses a three-step system that includes culling out the obviously bad resumes, a brief telephone interview, and questions that elicit more information than candidates realize they are giving.

FIRST, THE RESUME CUT

Go through the resumes and cull out the obvious rejects. They’re easy to spot, Zove says.

Most obvious are the ones with misspellings and mistakes in punctuation and grammar. Anybody who works in a law firm has to be literate.

Also throw out the ones that look archaic. Anybody worth hiring has the technical ability to send a resume that doesn’t look “like it was formatted 20 years ago.”

Check the employment dates. They need to be specific. An entry that shows employment spans only as “2009 to 2011” is a fairly good indicator the candidate is hiding a gap in employment and is trying to out-smart the administrator.

Also be cautious of the applicant who has stayed in the same kind of employment throughout the career and whose skills are flat. That shows complete disinterest in doing more than the basics. If the office wants someone who’s sharp and willing to take on new duties, that’s not the person to choose.

THENCE TO THE PHONES

The next screen takes place over the phone.

Call the applicants who made the first cut and set

up telephone interviews with them. Tell them “I’m conducting a quick search and then setting up live interviews.”

Ask more about the experience and whatever is on the resume, but be listing mostly to how the candidates present themselves. See if they are articulate.

Beware somebody who tries to talk with “kids crying and dogs barking in the background.” The interview has been scheduled, and anybody who hasn’t taken the time to find a quiet place to talk without interruption isn’t professional and isn’t concerned about doing fine work.

The same is true if the applicant is eating or chewing gum or smoking. Say good-bye.

NOW FOR THE REVEALING QUESTIONS

From those, choose the people to call in for personal interviews.

For those conversations, Zove lays out eight questions and two up-front rules.

The first rule is to make light, personal, and even humorous conversation. The purpose, she says, is not so much to calm the applicant’s nerves but to get that person relaxed and confident enough to answer the questions candidly.

The other rule is to stay away from the questions everybody asks such as “what are your strengths and weaknesses?” Everybody expects to get them, and everybody has an answer ready to pull out.

The eight questions are these:

- *What do you know about our firm, and why are you applying for this job?*

The answer shows which candidates truly want to work there and which ones “are sending their resumes all over the world.”

The serious applicant gives a response such as “I visited your website and read about X” or “you specialize in an area that is one of my strengths, and I’d

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like to be a part of that” or even “my friend Jane told me about you.”

The not-so-serious gives a disinterested answer such as “I really don’t know much about you.” That blows it, she says. With so much information available online, there’s no excuse for anybody to come in unprepared.

- *We have an extensive training program. If you were given the choice, in what area would you like more training?*

That’s another way to ask the standard what-are-your-weaknesses question, and it produces a useful response, because in answering it, people cite their weaknesses “without realizing it.”

They will say, for example, “I don’t know about X” or “I’d like to learn Y.”

- *If you could have changed one thing about your last job, what would it have been?*

The answer shows what that person wanted to accomplish and what that person found to be unsatisfactory.

It’s not unusual for someone to say “I wouldn’t have changed anything about it” or “I loved my job,” and when that happens, come back with “then why are you here?” A good answer usually follows, perhaps “the salary was too low.”

Listen for specifics such as “I felt micro-managed” or “I wish I’d received more training in X.”

The answer tells how well the applicant will fit into the new job. If the complaint is being micro-managed and the position reports to a micro-managing partner, don’t expect harmony.

- *Five years ago, you were working for X Employer. What skills have you developed since then?*

Look for evidence the applicant has progressed. Everybody should leave a job in a better position than when it began.

When somebody can’t cite any growth or development of new skills, bank on it that there won’t be

much progression. What’s more, that person will resent any change that comes in the new job.

- *Have you ever had a mentor? How did that person inspire you? Have you ever mentored anyone?*

The answers shows if the person is willing to accept feedback and also is willing to help others out and has the ability to motivate others.

They also indicate whether somebody is going to work as a team member, an important evaluation factor, she says, “because people who can’t work in a team setting aren’t going to be successful.”

- *How do you define success in your career?*

Make sure the candidate’s idea of success is something the job can meet. If somebody sees success as making \$100,000 a year and the job caps out at \$50,000, there’s no match.

On the other hand, if the goal is realistic and if the firm can help that person reach the goal, there’s potential for a good hire.

- *What type of personality do you conflict with?*

People usually tell about a trait that is the opposite of their own personality, she says. So if somebody says “people who are very high strung make me nervous,” that person is calm. And the next question, of course, is whether the attorney the applicant will be working for wants a calm assistant.

- *Tell me something about yourself that is not on your resume.*

That question is the zinger. The answer can make or break the hiring decision. Save it for last, because by then the applicant is relaxed and will give a candid responses.

Expect some interesting information, Zove says.

Someone might say “I have worked all my life and paid my own way through school.”

Or the answer might be that the applicant’s parents have served as good role models.

But just as often, a bomb gets dropped such as “well I just got out of prison.”

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