

The Search for Your Firm's Next Legal Administrator *Tips on Finding the Best Candidates and Fit for Your Firm*

by James S. Wilber

Progressive law firms understand the value in turning over day-to-day business management of the firm to non-lawyer, legal administrators, and they delegate those activities to their principal administrators (executive directors or chief operating officers), and through them, to the other administrators in the firm. Too few firms, however, know where to start in finding highly qualified candidates who best meet the needs of the firm. This article provides simple, common sense advice that will help you save time, money and heartache the next time you need to fill an important administrator's position.

TO SEEK OUTSIDE ASSISTANCE OR GO IT ALONE?

The first question is whether the firm should look for an administrator on its own or seek outside assistance for the search. If the firm is willing to take the time to clearly define the position it is seeking to fill and prepare a profile of the ideal candidate, and if it is likely to locate top-notch candidates with prior law firm experience on its own, there is no reason that a firm should feel it has to hire an outside consultant or headhunter to assist in the search. Stated another way, the real value that an experienced advisor can bring to the relationship is to help the firm define its exact needs, determine what type of position the firm should have (as opposed to that which it may presently have) and to know where to look for experienced candidates who can meet the firm's needs and the requirements of the position.

If a firm determines that outside assistance will be helpful, the next question is where to find it. There are some basic choices to be made. The first is whether to utilize the skills and relationships of a search consultant with extensive experience with law firms or whether to use a headhunter or a more generalized executive search firm. Such firms might already have some candidates who could be appropriate, but the drawback is that headhunters typically have little appreciation for the challenges of working in a law firm. You need to ask yourself how important it is for the outside expert to understand law firm culture and operations.

THE RIGHT FEE STRUCTURE

The next question is whether to use a search firm that charges on a contingency basis (typically one-third of the annual compensation for the position) or on an hourly basis. Contingency searches usually cost considerably more than do hourly searches, but of course, no payment is due if the consultant is unable to locate a suitable candidate. Hourly searches do not guarantee that the right candidate will be found, but they typically require thousands of dollars less than do contingency searches. In our experience over 25 years of conducting executive searches for law firms, the risk that the right candidate will not be found is virtually nonexistent. Still, some law firms like the guarantee that comes with a contingency search.

METHODOLOGY AND BEST PRACTICES

We believe that an optimal search process will include a set of ‘best practices’ designed to secure the best-fit candidate for your firm. If you decide to engage an outside advisor, here are some issues to consider:

- **Request information**

An advisor that understands the importance of learning as much as possible about the prospective employer (i.e., your law firm) will typically start the process by requesting and reviewing information regarding the firm, the organizational structure and the position itself.

- **Meet with key stakeholders**

The consultant should schedule a visit to the firm to interview members of the executive committee and the managing partner to discuss the position, the qualifications required of candidates, an ideal candidate profile, and to get a sense of the culture of the firm and its exact needs. It also is common to use the visit to talk to other partners, and very importantly, to the senior managers who report to the principal administrator.

- **Write or revise position description**

If the firm has no written description for the position, most experienced search consultants will assist in drafting one, or will assist in modifying an existing position description, as needed.

- **Determine salary range**

Using survey data and knowledge of the marketplace, the next step is to determine the appropriate salary range for the position, i.e., to be used to qualify the applicants.

- **Develop search strategy**

It is important to develop a profile of qualifications required of the position, and a search strategy. Experienced legal consultants usually have databases of potential candidates, and also, personal relationships with other administrators and with officers of local chapters of the Association of Legal Administrators, a tremendously rich source of good potential candidates.

- **Place appropriate advertisements**

The search firm should prepare and place employment advertising geared to attract individuals who might be satisfied where they are, but who would be interested in the position if they were aware of the opening. One of the advantages of using an outside consultant is that the advertising is often placed in the name of the outside firm – this protects the law firm from unsolicited communications from potential candidates, and more importantly, it provides assurance to good candidates that the search is completely confidential. If the search firm has a web site that attracts potential candidates (i.e., other legal administrators), the advertising should be placed there as well.

- **Identify and pre-screen qualified candidates**

The search consultant will review the resumes received and select those who appear to be the best qualified for an initial round of interviews. We strongly recommend that when those candidates are interviewed (in person of course), it is best to do it in the city in which the position is located. It is very important to determine as early in the process as possible whether good candidates are serious about relocating. Getting them to visit the firm’s headquarters city for the initial interview affords them an opportunity to look around and start getting a feel for what it would be like actually to live and work there.

- **Report and recommendations on finalists**

Finally, within a matter of two or three days after the interviews, the outside consultant will prepare reports on each candidate who is recommended for further interviews (this time, by the firm). The reports should be very detailed, and should provide you with the consultant’s specific recommendations for each individual candidate, including areas suggested for further exploration by the firm, as the firm begins its part of the process.

THE FIRM’S ROLE

Another important consideration is to what extent the law firm wants to rely on the outside consultant to narrow the field to a select handful of candidates, or whether to have

many resumes passed along to the law firm to make those determinations itself. If the outside firm is a headhunting or general search organization, it probably is best for the law firm to review a significant number of the best resumes (say, 20 to 30) and for it to have significant input into the initial interviewing selection process. Conversely, if the outside firm knows and understands law firms, it makes sense to let it narrow the field to as few as four or five “finalists” before turning the recommended candidates over to the firm for its round of interviews.

SELECTIVITY AND JUDGMENT

At Altman Weil, our philosophy in conducting searches for top-level law firm executives and administrators is to be very selective at every stage in the process. It is a waste of your firm’s time and money to have someone interview candidates other than those who are truly qualified for the position, or to recommend to you any candidate who would not have a chance to be selected by the firm in the first place. In a typical search, we narrow the field down to between four and eight for interviews by us in the first round, and usually recommend no more than three or four candidates to the firm for its final round of interviews. It is the exercise of our judgment, informed by deep understanding of law firms and the characteristics of successful firm administrators, that creates the greatest value. We provide that by engaging in this selective approach to the process.

We also handle executive searches through our most experienced and senior consultants rather than turning the process over to a more junior person – and we think that’s another best practice law firms should insist on when they’re filling a key position. The value we provide law firms is in judging exactly what it is they need in the position, what they are looking for in a candidate, and in determining which of the candidates come closest to being an ideal “fit.” It takes senior, experienced people to make those judgments and determinations.

CONCLUSION

So long as you know what your firm needs in a legal administrator and where to look for appropriate candidates, there is no reason you shouldn’t consider trying to fill your position on your own. Take the time to define the position in great detail and to develop a profile of the type of candidate who is likely to be right for the firm. Once you’ve done those things, however, you should move with considerable alacrity — good candidates looking for employment are in great demand. They often won’t be on the market for very long, and if you move too slowly, you’re likely to want to hire one of them only to find that he or she already has accepted a new position at a different firm.

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