

Hiring a Legal Assistant

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Hiring a legal assistant is a specialized task. It is not enough to be familiar with the basics of recruiting, interviewing and hiring. Consideration must be given to the nature of the profession, the job description of the position being recruited for, and the management practices which will attract and retain the most qualified legal assistants.

Before the recruiting process begins, analyze the functions and responsibilities of the position. Determine which duties will be delegated to a legal assistant, along with the time estimated to complete the work. A handy resource is a publication available through The National Federation of Paralegal Organizations entitled "Paralegal Responsibilities." Positions are detailed by specialty. When establishing the job description be sure to keep in mind the profit potential of certain duties and which matters clients expect to be performed at cost efficient rates.

After a detailed job description has been prepared, determine the level of education and experience required. Legal assistant institutions offer a smorgasbord of certificates and degrees. Many legal assistants have preceded their specialty training with undergraduate and graduate degrees. Be prepared to look beyond the degrees and certificates and become familiar with what is required to complete the various legal assistant programs.

There is merit in training a legal assistant who has minimal experience, but only if the attorney has time to devote to that individual. Consideration must be given to the resources available for training, including the attorneys, other legal assistants, educational seminars, and outside trainers. The lack of proper orientation and training is one of the most common reasons for legal assistant failure. Even the best training resources will not take the place of the boss's scrutiny, since the final criticism is that of the responsible attorney.

Evaluate honestly the advantages and disadvantages of the position. There are negatives associated with every job. The legal assistant must be made aware of routine tasks and the percentage of time devoted to them. Difficult personalities of office personnel, as well as clients, should be disclosed. If overtime is required, this should be considered as part of the job description. Through their struggle for recognition and reward, legal assistants have learned to sense the slightest potential for job dissatisfaction due to important details which were not properly discussed when being recruited.

Of course, the positive aspects of the position should be discussed, including flexible hours, a private office, dependable clerical support, client contact, travel, exceptional compensation and benefits, a comfortable environment, potential for growth, and a convenient commute to work. More than ever, legal assistants are seeking luxuries that may have been sacrificed while developing their niche in the law profession.

Be sincere about the career potential of the position. Career pathing for legal assistants is a delicate issue. Promotional possibilities, whether a new position or greater responsibility within the same position, is a selling point for any legal assistant opportunity. The law profession and related industries are fast recognizing legal assistant talent as valuable in law office and legal assistant

administration, training, automated support, public relations, employee benefits administration, trust administration, real estate, finance, and marketing.

Offer a salary and benefit package that is market competitive. A firm or corporation desiring well qualified and profitable legal assistants must be prepared to offer compensation that will attract individuals who have gained the expertise necessary to carry out the demands of the position. While entry level salaries are consistent with the need to be trained, experienced legal assistants are seeking competitive compensation and opportunities for promotion to achieve their professional goals. Take into consideration salary surveys. Most paralegal associations publish yearly utilization and salary surveys. In most cases summaries are available online. See lamanet.org; nalanet.org; paralegals.org. Legal assistant program directors are also a good source for entry level information.

Set up a system for evaluation and reward. A results oriented legal assistant will expect rewards for achievement and contribution. Individual goals for work production and firm contribution should be evaluated on a regular basis. The firm or company goals should be clearly stated and legal assistants should be recognized when their contributions result in success. The procedures employed will have an impact on the legal assistant's longevity of employment, and continued top rate performance. Alternatively, legal assistants whose performance is less than par should be made aware of their discrepancies and solutions incorporated to increase productivity and profitability.

Make smart use of recruiting resources. Entry level legal assistants can be recruited directly from legal assistant programs. Most programs have a procedure for sending resumes of their graduates upon request. These candidates are not pre-screened, but are sent as a service to their graduates and the community.

Promotion from within may also be a source for entry level legal assistants, provided there is ample training available. Many legal secretaries have completed paralegal training courses and are seeking opportunities for advancement without having to leave their current employer. Not to mention the bastion of experience they bring to the table. Consider also the possibility of cross training a legal assistant who is already on board. This not only gives the paralegal a chance to gain additional skills, but saves the organization the cost of bringing in a new employee.

Networking with legal assistant associations is a good word-of-mouth referral system. Some associations have job banks. Again, these applicants are not pre-screened, but the referring party may be able to render an informal reference. Keep in mind that legal assistants who are staying association active are usually well-informed, educated candidates who are usually very opportunistic.

Search firms are an efficient source for pre-screened experienced applicants. A well informed recruiter can save the firm or company time and money in advertising, resume screening and preliminary interviewing, as well as maintain confidentiality for the client and the candidate. A legal assistant search specialist should screen carefully the candidate's past performance, education, career goals, and offer insight into their potential for the position being recruited for.

One significant advantage to working with a professional recruiter is that they cultivate candidates who are not actively seeking employment, but are receptive to new career options. These are generally the cream of the crop legal assistants for which there is a high demand due to their level of productivity and profitability.

Hiring a good legal assistant is no easy task. As the profession has evolved expectations for the position have become far more complex. Lawyers expect excellent training from top schools. Clients want lower cost services. With this kind of demand, the combination of proper planning, resourceful recruiting and sound management practices are paramount to the promotion of dependable talent and increased longevity. Organizations that take these considerations seriously can strengthen their practice immensely.

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