

Interviewing: What to Ask, What Not to Ask*

By Janet L. Woodruff-Sullivan and Kimberlee P. Nickolas

Interviewing job candidates is an important part of every law firm's future and good interviewing skills are imperative. Interviewing well requires a little preparation and a comfort level with meeting people and with the questions you want to ask, so when the time comes, you will know if the candidate is going to fit the bill. But don't ask the "wrong" questions.

In most firms, the human resources staff member or the office manager will discuss the position, benefits and hours with the candidate, as well as ask their own questions and answer any of the candidate's questions. Then the attorney gets his/her turn.

Interviewing is one area where "you get out of it what you put into it." If you take the time to connect with the candidate, you are far more likely to make a successful hire.

First, review the resume and be prepared. If possible, use a conference room so both parties are sitting at a table instead of across a desk. It will help the candidate be more at ease and ready to talk. Making a connection will help the candidate give full and thoughtful answers — not rushed or rehearsed.

The "rules" for interviewing center around good basic people skills, which include attentiveness, eye contact, proper body language, and courtesy.

How do you really find out what you need to know? Here are a few questions that may help:

- **What duties did you enjoy most at your last job?** Make sure the candidate gives specific examples. Then you can tell whether the duties you need them to perform are similar.
- **What did you accomplish at your previous job that made you proud?** Again, the candidate needs to be specific. This will let you know if they take some initiative and want to do more than only what is in their job description.
- **How do you handle multiple tasks given at once? How did you prioritize?** These questions will tell you how they handle stress and if they are organized.
- **What weakness would you like to work on and improve?** Come on, we all have at least one.
- **Why are you leaving your current job?** If the candidate was fired, you can ask why.
- **Why us?** Why did you send your resume to our firm?

What you really want to get out of the interview is whether this person is a good fit for the firm. Can the candidate work efficiently and in a timely manner and help when needed, possibly without being asked?

What Not to Ask

- No questions regarding marital status, including questions about a maiden name.
- No age-related questions.
- No questions regarding citizenship. You can ask if the candidate has a Visa or other documentation that will allow U.S. employment.
- No questions about race or ethnic origin. So, be careful when breaking the ice and wanting to ask the candidate, "Where are you from?" If the candidate isn't hired, this could be used against you. You may not ask where a

person was born, their native language, or if they are fluent in any other languages. If applicable, you may explain that a certain language is needed to perform the job and ask if they are fluent in that language.

- No questions about religion.
- No questions related to physical conditions or disabilities or work missed due to illness. But you may ask how many days they were absent from work during the last year to ascertain reliability in attendance.
- No questions about arrests. Convictions, yes; arrests, no.
- No questions regarding organizations or social interests. You may ask if there are any professional organizations or community achievements that influenced their professional development.

If a candidate initiates inappropriate discussion regarding these topics, the interviewer must stop the discussion. Stick to questions about duties, experience and skills, but nothing personal.

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