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Making a Good Lawyer: Beyond the Mundane Metrics

Skills and Professional Development



What makes a good lawyer? While we've all spent many years in law school and beyond pondering the question, there are a few accepted metrics. Billable hours, pedigree, and experience at big-name firms often come to mind. And for many attorney positions, technical skills are table stakes.

But as a hiring manager and former general counsel, I have interviewed, hired, and managed many professionals. And I can decisively confirm that technical skills, once established, are almost never a reason to make a final hiring decision. Instead, I find that I and many of my colleagues focus on numerous soft skills. After all, we aren't lawyers in a vacuum, and no amount of technical skills can help an attorney who lacks these innate professional qualities.

Creativity and innovation

In the age of quick technological and social changes, creativity and innovation are paramount skills for all professionals, including lawyers. I often ask candidates for examples of times they've done something that has not been done before, and how they went about it.

Sometimes, I ask, "What is the most creative idea or project you have completed in your current role, and how was it received?" I also ask candidates to tell me about the times when they have had to develop creative solutions to problems. For example, "Tell me about a business or legal problem that you had to solve in a unique or innovative way. What was the outcome?"

Empathy

Empathy is often described as being able to "put yourself in another person's shoes." Ultimately, it is

about understanding the other person's perspective and reality. It requires one to think beyond herself and her concerns. When I interview a candidate, I always assess whether she can put aside her own viewpoint.

Is she able to see things from another person's point of view? Does she regularly examine her own views? Does she listen to others? Does she validate the perspectives of others? Does she ask others about their point of view or what they would do? Does she listen carefully? Does she pay attention physically and mentally? Does she respond to the central question or message? All these questions can be answered both by directly asking the candidate for examples or by simply observing her.

Self-management

Self-management is a combination of key skills and characteristics that include: self-confidence, stress management, time management, organizational skills, and many others. To assess these skills, I ask candidates to tell me about various situations they have had in the past. As they speak, I notice each candidate's ability to stay positive, enjoy the small things, prioritize competing objectives, identify and work through challenging situations, live fully, and have perspective. Candidates who seem positive and put together instead of anxious and frazzled show potential to be great professionals.

Passion

I find that lawyers who can clearly and thoughtfully explain why they get up in the morning — my proxy for passion, commitment, and drive — are more likely to persevere, have better judgment, and build lasting professional relationships. I am always surprised how many people answer this question with: "My mortgage." Yes, this joke answer is a little funny, though maybe not after I have heard it what feels like thousands of times. This answer suggests to me that while the candidate may have a sense of humor, I have caught her off guard with my question.

If you have to scramble for a joke answer when someone asks why you get up in the morning, perhaps you don't know the answer yourself. It is important to take the time to assess your passion and motivation. The best answers I have heard explain candidate's very personal reasons for their professional choices, whether it's going to a specific law school, making a career pivot, or choosing a particular life experience. If handled well, these questions are an opportunity to get to know a candidate beyond the superficial interview formalities.

Self-development

We are works in progress, and self-development is a lifelong commitment. I find that the ability to assess your own skills and qualities, consider your personal and professional goals, and set goals in order to show up as the best version of yourself is highly correlated to one's success, achievement, and perseverance. In interviews, I will often ask a candidate how she improves her skills and qualities. While I am not looking for a specific answer, I am listening for the ways she articulates, plans, holds herself accountable, perseveres, and, when appropriate, revises her vision for developing herself. I find that the candidates who take personal responsibility for their self-development are able to grow with an organization and accommodate its changing needs.

While this is by no means an exhaustive list of what makes a good lawyer, these skills and characteristics are a good place to start when evaluating your own strength as a candidate for a legal

position — or any professional position. It can be easy to rest on the laurels of typical career success indicators like the prestigious schools, firms, and organizations on our résumés. However, by focusing on innate characteristics, professionals can improve themselves not only as job candidates, but as people too.

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