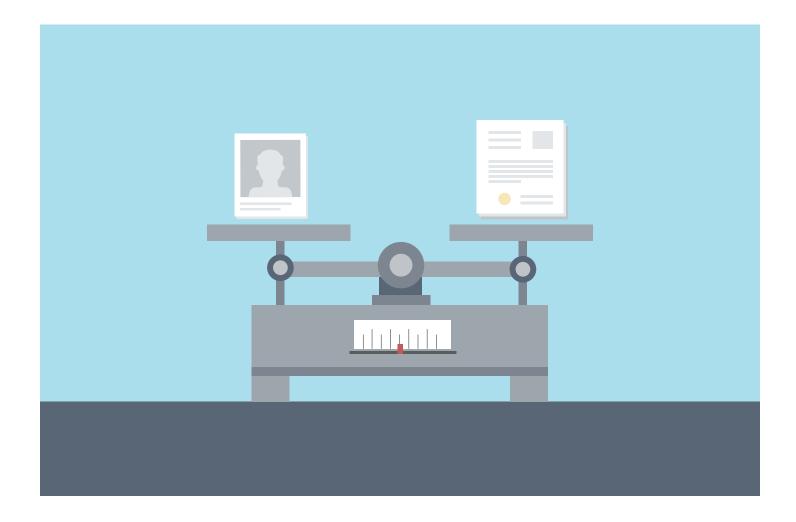# Hire for Success:

5 Secrets to Growing Your Law Firm

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EVOLVELAW™

Make good decisions, hire good lawyers

When it comes to running a business, hiring those directly contributing to your firm's success is arguably the single most important task for any leader. For law firms in particular, your people are your product. Whether you're a large firm or a small shop, hiring the people who best represent you and your brand is mission critical.

But who are the right candidates? How do you sift through a sea of applicants—whose resumes are often near-identical—to find the perfect fit for your company? And how do you give them the best chance of success once they come on board? These are questions that can keep even the savviest hiring managers up at night, because poor hiring decisions can significantly damage your business.

With that in mind, here are five best practices to guide your hiring process.

Hiring tip #1: Define your firm's culture

It may seem counterintuitive, but the first step to hiring great staff starts with some serious self-reflection. Do you know why the perfect candidate would want to work for you? Answering this generally comes down to defining your unique culture and values.

Employees will choose to work at your company based on the work itself and your brand credibility, but also based on their own happiness and sense of accomplishment. Your company culture will be a major factor in determining the satisfaction, or even inspiration, your employees find when working for you.

Culture is not something law firms have historically spent much time on, but to truly understand how it can help with hiring and influencing the overall success of an organization, we can look to Silicon Valley for inspiration. In the tech startup world, companies take culture very seriously. In a lot of ways, the jobs in Silicon Valley are actually similar to those in the legal world. People work incredibly long hours in highly competitive environments with much at stake.

The difference is that tech companies offer candidates more than just a salary. They provide professional development and a sense of meaning by creating strong cultures. They spend an enormous amount of time throughout the hiring process to determine cultural "fit" before bringing someone on. This makes a huge difference. As Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos (which was acquired by Amazon for $1 billion), likes to say, "If you get the culture right, most of the other stuff will just take care of itself."

Once you commit to clearly defining your culture, remember to make sure it's distinct. What is different about working at your firm compared to your closest competitor? Stay away from the trap of using generic buzzwords like "excellence" and "collaboration." These are things that all lawyers must value to be successful. What are the unique values that distinguish you from your peers? These are what really define your culture.

Defining your culture and your values takes time, but it is worth it. This exercise should be done with the entire executive team and should include input from every single employee. If you're not sure what your culture is, it can be eye opening to ask a junior member of your team for his or her honest feedback—it likely won't be what you expect. One person or a core team can lead the charge on drafting the description of your culture and values, but everyone at the company should provide comments. You should strongly encourage honest feedback, even if it is negative. Every team member's perspective is valuable and will help you gain insight into running your business better.

A bad example of defining culture from an anonymous mid-sized law firm

Some law firms take the time to define their culture and values, but very few articulate their unique values. Here's a real example of one mid-sized law firm's values:

1. Integrity

2. Client Focus

3. Intellectual Rigor

4. Collaboration

5. Excellence

Can you name the firm? Unlikely. These are poor examples because they are generic—and arguably prerequisites for practicing law in general. Unfortunately, most law firms that define their values fall into this trap.

Put yourself in the candidate's shoes. Will she know what sets you apart from other firms? Go deeper into what makes your firm unique. If this exercise seems challenging, bring in experts like Evolve Law to facilitate the process.

Hiring tip #2: Hire based on culture

Once you have determined your firm's culture, relentlessly hire based on the values that you have articulated. There are many smart, highly skilled attorneys in the candidate pool, but finding a culture-sync is what truly makes teams gel and achieve success.

This also holds true for promoting and firing. It can be challenging to part ways with the super smart workhorse who has a short temper and is difficult to work with (unless that is your defined culture!), but taking that step will immediately improve the effectiveness of the rest of the team and demonstrate how seriously you take your culture and values. Do not tolerate behavior that is adverse to your culture. Incorporate culture into your quarterly or annual review process and regular office discussion. For example, many startups give out monthly or quarterly awards to the people who most embody each cultural value as voted by their colleagues. Simple activities like this will reinforce your values and make them stronger by showing that your organizational commitment is not just lip service.

Hiring based on culture also leads to higher retention rates. The associate attorney role is consistently ranked as the unhappiest job in America with 77 percent of attorneys leaving a firm by their fifth year.[1] Study after study shows that attorneys are willing to trade salary for increased intangibles such as job flexibility, leadership opportunities, and positive company culture. If your culture is clearly defined, people who align with that culture, and who know they'll be happier at your company, are often willing to take lower salaries to work there. They'll also be more likely to demonstrate a higher degree of loyalty and better overall team dynamics.

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> " There are many smart, highly skilled attorneys in the candidate pool, but finding a culture-sync is what truly makes teams gel and achieve success.

A good example of defining culture: Clio's values

Clio is a legal technology company that embraces the Silicon Valley ethos. Clio has seen rapid growth since 2008, now employing 200 staff across North America and Europe. As the company expanded, it saw increasing challenges around maintaining clear communications across departments, aligning staff with company expectations, and minimizing inefficiencies.

This wasn't to say the company didn't have its own culture. Loosely defined, the company was laid back yet serious and incredibly hard-working; it embraced its own unique sense of humor; and it strove to do great things. But, "loosely defined" was a problem—especially when it came to bringing on new talent.

How did Clio cope? It put together a task force of employees from the company's diverse personnel— representing aspects of varying seniority, experience, and individual roles. The Values Team, as it's called, was responsible for identifying the stories, actions, behaviors, and individuals that defined what was great about Clio, which they reviewed and revised with broader company feedback.

The result? These seven culture-defining values:

1. Customer Success Comes First

2. Thrive as #TeamClio

3. Draw the Owl

4. Live a Learning Mindset

5. No Doors, Only Windows

6. Work Hard, Be Agile

7. Stay Fit, Have Fun

These are distinct, unique values that have meaning to the employees at Clio. If you don't know what "Draw the Owl" means, ask any Clio employee and they'll tell you with a smile on their face. When done well, as in the case of Clio, defining company values leads to team cohesion and a sense of community. Knowing who you want to be early on can help shape where you end up growing as a company.

"Knowing our values brings us together—and helps us find the people we want to work with."

—Rian Gauvreau, Chief People Officer at Clio

Hiring tip #3: Have the right process in place

You have taken a great deal of time and care to sift through resumes and LinkedIn profiles to find the right candidates to interview. But do you have the right hiring process set up? Do you have a process at all? Is it implemented consistently to accurately compare candidates?

It's important to have your hiring process established before you start interviewing. This will help ensure that you learn the right information about each candidate and are consistent across all prospects. To do this, make sure you know what you're looking for at each stage of the interviewing process—from your initial phone call, to your own in-person interview, and interviews with other team members. Make sure you also know how and where your information will be shared among existing staff. For larger firms, this is something to work through with your hiring manager and recruiting department. For smaller firms, process is even more important, as the onus is on you to keep everyone aligned.

There is no one-sized-fits-all solution. What you come up with should be tailored to your company's needs. And if something isn't working, continue to tweak and improve the process as you learn more. The most important thing is that you write it down so that everyone involved understands the process and expectations at each stage.

Asking the right interview questions can give you more information about your candidates and will help you learn whether they will be a good fit for your company. There is no set-in-stone guide for the questions every company should ask, but the best questions elicit specific examples from past experiences so you can see how candidates approach and resolve different scenarios. Ask questions like "Can you share an example of when you hit a roadblock with a client and how you overcame it?" or "Tell me about a time when you missed a client deadline and what you learned from that experience." How a prospect responds to these questions will give you valuable insight into how the candidate reacts to real-life scenarios, which tends to be the most helpful in predicting success on the job.

Of course, candidates are most likely to share past experiences that make them look good, so another effective interview strategy is to give real-world scenarios of sticky situations that the candidate may encounter and ask them to tell you how they'd respond. It works best if you use an actual situation that occurred or a current challenge you are facing (anonymizing any identifiable details), and listen carefully to how the candidate would attack this problem. The more realistic the situation, the better. As they respond, try to visualize whether you would approve of the actions suggested if they were really on your team and you were the manager.

It is also extremely useful to give interviewees a homework assignment to see how they approach real problems that are slightly more complex than you can cover in a short interview. You'll see their level of preparation and thoughtfulness—which can show how how excited they are about the specific job and your company—and what their actual work product will look like. It may seem extreme to give work to someone who doesn't yet work for you, but this is a standard practice in many industries, including finance and tech startups. Again, it is always best to use scenarios that are very close to the reality of what the candidate would be doing in their role as opposed to pure hypotheticals. You want to narrow the candidate

Hiring tip #3: Have the right process in place (continued)

pool to the people who clearly demonstrate that they can do the job, not just the ones who interview well. You might even learn something about a real project you are working on from having a fresh outside perspective tackle it during an interview.

It is also worth noting that the hiring process is typically different for junior and senior employees. Both come with different expectations, so you need to ask different questions for each type of interview. With junior employees, you are searching for potential, which means you need to understand their raw skills and personality to see how they would fit into the broader team environment and company culture. With senior executives, you need to drill deeply into prior experience, management skills, real-life scenarios, and problem-solving abilities first. Personality and culture fit are important here too, but they come after an assessment of whether they can actually perform senior-level job requirements. For any leadership role, you should have candidates complete 30-60-90-day plans to articulate their overall vision for where they think the company should go and how they will help get it there. This is a great homework assignment to make sure their vision aligns with your goals, which will allow you to better trust their decision-making abilities with minimal oversight once they are on the team. When you can trust your managers to make decisions without much oversight because you are comfortably aligned in your collective vision for the business, it leads to happier, more empowered managers; higher productivity; lower attrition; and less work for you.

Finally, remember to also screen specifically for culture. There should be a portion of the interview process dedicated to figuring out how the candidate aligns with your culture and values. Generally, it's best to designate one person from the team to conduct a culture interview, where the interviewer is not assessing skill level or experience, but only cultural fit. This "cultural ambassador" should embody your culture and be singularly focused on assessing the candidate's ability to perform well within that culture.

Overall, having a clear process that is implemented consistently will allow you to clearly see who is right and who is wrong for your team. You'll still get it wrong on occasion, and the most important thing to do there is to correct the mistake immediately. Over time, you'll develop a sixth sense for hiring, and you'll have the historical data to analyze what works and what doesn't work.

Hiring tip #4: Develop an onboarding process

Once the perfect candidate has accepted your offer, you still have more work to do. For a new hire, the first few weeks are critical. It is important to have a clear and comprehensive onboarding process to give the candidate the best chance of success.

Onboarding should involve several members of the team and incorporate some or all of the following components:

- Company overview: Who are we and what makes us different?

- Company values

- Technology tools: onboarding and training for each product

- Review of HR policies and procedures

- Job-specific overview and training

- Shadowing colleagues in the same or similar roles

- Welcome lunch with hiring manager or whole team on first day

Hiring tip #4: Develop an onboarding process (continued)

- One-on-one meetings with department manager and everyone on the team who the candidate will be working with directly; keep it informal to develop relationships with the new hire and encourage him or her to ask lots of questions

- Mini projects to help solidify retention of topics covered (e.g., make your first entry into our time-tracking system, or draft a one-page summary of what you learned from shadowing your peers)

- Review of the first 30, 60, and 90 days on the job (including performance metrics, projects to complete, and anything else you want to track), so the candidate is ready to be a fully-functioning team member after 90 days

Ideally, the onboarding process should take approximately two weeks, with no actual work being done until the onboarding is complete. While it's tempting to immediately assign work to new hires, have patience; it will pay off. A new employee's first impression of the company matters; it sets the tone for their tenure at your firm and will have a lasting impact. It can be time-consuming, especially for hiring managers who need to be actively involved. However, you should view an investment in a new hire as an investment in your business. If the employee succeeds, you succeed. A comprehensive and fun onboarding process will give them the best chance to achieve success quickly and will leave them with a positive impression of your firm. On the flip side, it will also help you to evaluate if someone is not a good fit. With the right expectations, tools, and timelines in place, you and your new employee should both have a good sense of how things are working out within the first 90 days.

A good onboarding process will help new employees ramp up quickly and build enthusiasm for the company and their new role, giving everyone the best chance of maximizing the positive impact of every new hire.

Use real-world scenarios to predict real-world performance

Role play

Ask the candidate to picture themselves in a specific situation and tell you what they would do. For example, how would they pitch your firm for business development purposes? Tell them, "Pretend I am a prospective client and you are a member of our firm's team. How would you articulate why I should work with your firm over your competitor?" Whether this is an important part of their job or not, it's useful to see what the candidate knows about your firm and what information they believe is important.

Role-play scenarios are also useful for understanding how candidates will approach conflict. For example, have her walk through a scenario: "We quoted the customer a flat fee but the project became much more complex and time-consuming than originally expected. If I am the client, lead a conversation breaking the news to me that you are raising the price."

Solve a real problem

Pick a recent challenge that you or someone at the candidate's level faced. Anonymize the information and give it to them as a case study. Ask them to spend five minutes walking you through how they would approach and resolve this problem. A more advanced version is to give a homework assignment to explore the problem and their suggested solution in more detail.

Create a 30-60-90-day plan

For more senior-level candidates in the final stages of the hiring process, ask them to put together a five-to-ten-minute presentation on what they would do in their first 30, 60, and 90 days on the job to ensure that they are successful.

Hiring tip #5: Don't ignore red flags

Once you've made a few hires, you'll start to develop your own hiring instinct. It's easy to want to see the best in people, especially when they're putting their best foot forward in an interview. But pay close attention throughout. If there are any concerns that pop up throughout the course of the interview process, make note and discuss them with the rest of the interview team.

Assume that any flaws or concerns will be ten times worse once the candidate joins your team. Can you live with that? If not, do not hire. It's much better to have a false negative (you don't hire someone who is great) than a false positive (you hire someone you think is great, but is not). If you have candidates with red flags in their work history, or more importantly in their personality or cultural fit, it's best to simply pass on them rather than make a decision you'll end up regretting. Learn to trust your gut.

This is also where references are extremely valuable. Always check references before extending an offer. If any red flags come up during the interview process, specifically address them with the references. For example, if someone is late to an interview and this is something that would be a problem for you or your clients, ask their references to weigh in on the issue. For example, you might bring up something like, "Betty showed up late to an interview and punctuality is really important at our firm. You've worked with her in the past; is this something that happens frequently or was this out of character?"

No matter how talented or qualified the candidate may be, the time wasted onboarding and managing a person who is a bad cultural fit—not to mention the damage inflicted on your overall culture and company—is not worth it. Never rush to make a hire because you need a body on the ground doing work. Be picky and trust your instincts.

In the end, remember that each person you hire will become part of your daily life. You want to enjoy working with that person and have that person enjoy working with you and your team. Throughout every step of the interviewing and vetting process, always be yourself and represent the company culture accurately. If

you're trying to be something you're not, the candidate will find out eventually when they join the team and it will be bad for everyone involved. If you remain authentic throughout the process, the right person will shine through as a good cultural fit and the hiring decision will be easy. Culture is the key to hiring success and is always worth the time invested.

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About Jules Miller

Jules is an investor, three-time entrepreneur, 'intrapreneur,' and hands-on operations expert. She is co-founder of Evolve Law, a community of entrepreneurs, law firms, in-house lawyers and legal services companies dedicated to accelerating the adoption of technology and innovation in the legal industry. She is also a Venture Partner at LunaCap Ventures and interim COO of Brava Investments. Jules was previously co-founder and COO of Hire an Esquire. She also spent seven years as an 'intraprenuer' helping companies including Ernst & Young, Salesforce.com and Tiffany & Co. to launch and grow new business units.

About Evolve Law

Evolve Law is a community of 100+ legal entrepreneurs and early adopters dedicated to being a catalyst for the accelerated adoption of technology and innovation in the legal industry. Members include early stage startups (Alt Legal, Allegory, Doxly), larger tech companies (Avvo, Clio, LegalZoom), law firms (DWT, Dentons NextLaw Labs), and legal service providers (Thomson Reuters, Wolters Kluwer). Evolve Law produces 20+ events per year around the U.S. and Canada; and content including podcasts, blogs, videos, and social media amplification; Evolve Law Jobs as a resource for people who want to work in legal tech; and the LegalTech Toolkit for attorneys who want to incorporate more technology into their practice.

Sources

1. Raasch, Janet Ellen. "Making Partner - Or Not: Is It In, Up or Over in the 21st Century?" Law Practice: The Business of Practicing Law.

About Clio

Clio is the most comprehensive cloud-based practice management platform for the legal industry. With the help of the cloud, Clio eases the process of time tracking, billing, administration, and collaboration for law firms of all sizes. Based in Vancouver, B.C., and with a European office in Dublin, Clio is used by legal professionals in over 50 countries. Clio has raised $27 million from investors including Bessemer Venture Partners.