

Becoming a Search Consultant

Why would one become a search consultant? Some recruiters who are with us have transitioned from life within law firms. The perspective they bring with them by moving “to the other side” is unique and extremely helpful. Many of the persons who work within firms, whether they be lawyers, recruiting coordinators, paralegals, or other members of the staff, are intimately involved with the recruiting process. Although recruiting within a firm can be exhausting when it is an additional duty, every search brings people with new motivations, desires and career goals, and almost everyone enjoys the result of a successful search. Helping people attain their goals while helping one’s firm was what kept many of us involved in the recruiting process. In a similar way, we are able to continue with these core activities as staffing consultants: helping people realize their career objectives while helping the firms that hire our candidates to meet their needs as well.

We would like to share with you some of the perceptions we had of search firms when we were inside law firms, some of the challenges we now face as search consultants, my reasons for choosing to work for Law Firm Staff and the potential risks I have taken and the rewards I hope to achieve in making this transition.

I. As a Recruiting Coordinator, What Was My Perception of Search firms?

Most law firms will probably tell you that dealing with search consultants is a “necessary evil” of their profession. To be candid, each of us sometimes hated dealing

with search firms when we were inside law firms. But it was typically a certain kind of recruiter we hated, not the profession. We liked dealing with some recruiters, and we hated dealing with others. The select group of firms we liked dealing with, we called upon on a regular basis. Those we liked had fairly similar characteristics.

A. What were the characteristics of search firms with whom we wanted to work?

1. They were straightforward and honest. Like anyone, we like dealing with people who are honest and accurately represent the facts. We liked working with search consultants that were honest about their candidates, accurately represented their employment history, and were attempting to make a good match for their candidates and our law firm.

2. They helped us meet our goals. Inside the firms, we viewed search consultants as the means by which we could effectively deliver high quality candidates to the firm for consideration. As long as they assisted us in meeting that primary goal, we were happy to engage their services. But there were other ways in which search consultants were helpful. They could provide us information regarding hiring trends in the legal market, compensation structures and policies at other law firms. So, there were definite advantages to developing good relationships with search consultants.

3. They knew their candidates. The most reliable search firms know their candidates.

On a weekly basis, we were faced with many resumes to review and we did not have the time to ask the questions about every candidate that should have been asked and answered directly in writing by the consultant representing them. If our law firm was going to engage the services of a search consultant, we felt the search consultant should have taken the time to get to know and aggressively represent the candidate.

4. They effectively profiled the candidates with whom they worked. We were particularly pleased to work with firms who took the time to answer in a cover letter all of the issues we would have raised regarding a particular candidate's resume, i.e., academic performance, reasons for leaving his/her prior employer(s), reasons for gaps in employment, how the candidate performed at his/her employer(s) - anything that would be relevant to my firm's hiring of the candidate. It also helped to receive information not reflected on the resume to further assess the candidates strengths, qualifications and overall competency.

5. They were familiar with and adhered to our law firms' hiring guidelines. It was vital to the successful placement of a candidate with our firms that the search consultant understood what our law firms were looking for. We were impressed when a search consultant took the time to ask me about our firm's hiring criteria, a particular practice group's composition, or other general information about my firm. Educating a search firm about these things can only improve the process and is a great, inexpensive way to market one's law firm to prospective candidates.

6. They delivered highly qualified candidates. Search firms that consistently represented highly qualified candidates were the search firms we called when we had an opening.

B. What were characteristics of search firms with whom we did not want to work?

1. They did not conduct themselves in an ethical manner. This could include anything from misrepresenting a candidate's qualifications or employment history to not adhering to the terms of a fee agreement.

2. They did not take the time to get to know our law firm or our firm's hiring guidelines. We were not interested in working with search firms that consistently faxed resumes of candidates that did not meet our firm's hiring guidelines. When they did this, it led us to believe that they had not taken the time to get to know our firm and they were casual in their approach to the process.

3. They did not know their candidates and were not able to answer basic questions about them. As firm insiders, we were surprised when a search firm could not answer very basic questions about a candidate's employment history. In fact, we were surprised when we received a resume without an accompanying letter detailing a candidate's experience and other relevant information. After all, anyone can fax a resume. If this information was not included with a submission, we were led to believe that the search firm had not taken the time to interview the candidate and did not care enough about the candidate or my law firm to do a thorough job. It also meant that we would have to take extra time out of

our day to call the search firm and get the information - to essentially do the search firm's job.

4. They expected a fee which was based on a candidate's salary and bonus. When we were inside firms, we thought it was generally overreaching for any search firm to expect to receive a fee based both on the candidate's salary and her bonus. We still believe this practice is overreaching and we don't think a candidate's bonus should be included in any fee arrangement.

5. They did not adhere to the terms of fee agreements and generally accepted rules of the profession. As a recruiting coordinator, we often scrutinized any fee agreement we received from a search firm to ensure that our firm's best interests were protected. When a search firm makes representations in its own fee agreement or signs off on a law firm's fee agreement, it should adhere to the terms. While one person we know was acting as a recruiting coordinator inside a firm, a renowned search firm she dealt with refused to refund a portion of the fee when an associate her firm hired through the search firm left the firm within the first six-months of his employment. The language in the fee agreement was very straightforward, yet the search firm left it "open" to their "interpretation" of the language and refused to refund the fee. This was unprofessional and unethical and forever changed my view of that particular search firm and the manner in which it conducted business.

6. They submitted associate resumes directly to attorneys in my firm without submitting a copy to our recruiting coordinator. One of the daunting tasks of

recruiting coordinators is to keep track of resumes received by their law firms, particularly those submitted through search firms. Our recruiting coordinators did not appreciate search consultants submitting associate resumes directly to attorneys in our law firm. It impeded their ability to effectively administer the process, keep accurate records and ensure that their firm was not later dragged into a fee dispute situation. As a search consultant, when representing associates to law firms, we always try to keep recruiting professionals informed.

7. Misrepresenting a candidate's qualifications and employment history or not disclosing information that would impact a firm's decision to hire a candidate.

II. What are the challenges we face as search consultants?

As search consultants for Law Firm Staff, Inc. we face many challenges, not the least of which include identifying qualified candidates, gaining knowledge of law firms and new markets and effectively matching candidates with the right law firm.

1. Trying to determine if a candidate is a good fit for a particular law firm. Law Firm Staff, Inc. consultants and staff allocate an enormous amount of time and resources to researching law firms. We also spend a lot of time contacting recruiting coordinators to determine what their needs are and how we can better service them. These tasks require a lot of time, but are essential to the successful, long-term placement of candidates.

2. Educating candidates about law firms and helping them overcome preconceived notions they may have about particular firms. On a daily basis, we deal with candidates that will not consider interviewing with particular firms because of things they have heard through peers or through the legal grapevine. Individuals flourish in different environments. It is important as a search consultant to be able to distinguish between law firms, provide candidates with as many opportunities as possible, encourage them to look past their preconceived notions to meet with a variety of firms, and to ultimately assist them in determining where they might best fit in.

3. Educating law firms about candidates. One of our challenges as search consultants is to provide as much information to law firms about my candidates as we possibly can. We have developed a motto along these lines: "If you can't write at least three to four pages about a candidate with whom you are working, then you obviously don't know the candidate very well." Profiling candidates is crucial to the accurate and successful representation of any candidate. Our profiles have been very well received by recruiting coordinators and hiring partners nationwide and we believe they are a good example of how Law Firm Staff, Inc. has sought to improve the candidate selection process.

4. Servicing the candidate and the law firm - trying to make a good match. Although as search consultants we represent the candidate, it is our goal to also represent the interests of the law firm. It is impossible to make a good match without doing both. This requires us to serve as a mediator between the candidate and the law firm, bringing the

parties together for a successful alliance. We spend an enormous amount of time each day attempting to understand what particular firms are looking for, their hiring criteria, and their specific hiring needs.

5. Attracting and Delivering the "Stars." Not unlike our goal as a recruiting coordinator, our goal as search consultants is to deliver the best talent to law firms. Law Firm Staff, Inc. consultants represent approximately 3-5% of the total number of candidates that contact us, and our representation of those candidates comes only after a crucial and time-consuming screening process.

6. Getting personally involved in candidates' lives. As we stated earlier, one of the primary reasons we felt comfortable making the transition to search consultant life was that we knew we would be able to continue to make a positive impact on candidates' lives and the hiring process generally. We have been able to do that. In fact, approximately 40% of our time is spent listening to candidates' fears, motivations, and concerns about providing for their families and counseling them regarding achieving their career goals.

7. Fee Agreements. As search consultants, we have encountered law firms who will not look at resumes from search firms that are not on their "approved" list. Fortunately, we are on most of these lists. Still, we believed as firm insiders, and we still believe, that limiting the pool of candidates from which a law firm can choose inhibits a law firm's ability to attract the best and brightest talent. We believe it is imperative that recruiting professionals be open to at least reviewing resumes from search firms

not on their approved list and that search firms should be willing to sign off on fee agreements required by law firms.

8. Trying to work through the lateral administrative processes of law firms.

Law firm procedures can either enhance or inhibit the hiring process. Recruiting coordinators face a number of obstacles trying to work through the administrative processes in law firms, and it can sometimes be unnerving. The politics, procedures, lack of candidate profiling, scheduling and rescheduling, slow decision making and delays can be very frustrating for recruiting coordinators who work hard to achieve their hiring goals. Search consultants experience similar frustrations. It is not uncommon to have a candidate interview at a law firm, receive praise and adoration from the firm and then receive no word, sometimes for weeks, as to how the firm intends to proceed. Unfortunately, sometimes this "slow to the draw" approach makes what would have otherwise been a pleasant alliance a distasteful misunderstanding and the candidate is often left feeling discouraged and unwanted. Conversely, firms who are most effective in their recruiting efforts are quick to move on highly qualified candidates and are just as timely with their decision to hire or pass on a particular candidate. These are the firms that attract and are able to effectively recruit the best talent.

9. Overcoming the perception on the part of recruiting coordinators that all search firms' goals and motivations are the same.

Just as no two law firms are alike, likewise, search firms are vastly different in their approach to the process and their motivations. We chose to work with Law

Firm Staff, Inc. because we believe their approach is the most professional, effective and progressive we have encountered. (See our discussion later about why we chose Law Firm Staff, Inc.)

10. Law firms not adhering to the Rules of the Profession.

As firm insiders, we often complained about search firms that did not act professionally or adhere to commonly accepted professional rules of conduct. It has been interesting being on the other side of the transaction and encountering law firms that do not adhere to those rules. For example, it is commonly accepted by law firms and search consultants that, once a candidate is submitted through a search firm, a fee will be owed to the search firm if the law firm interviews and hires the submitted candidate, and the candidate remains at the firm for a period of at least 6 months thereafter. Surprisingly, there are firms that do not adhere to this commonly accepted approach. So, it appears that there are legitimate complaints to be made on both sides of the transaction!

III. Why did we choose to Work for Law Firm Staff?

Deciding to leave our firms was a very difficult decision for each of us. Each of us had been at our firms for at least several years and we had established very strong personal and professional relationships. We hoped to be able to translate that same quality experience to the search firm environment.

We are happy to say that we have been able to do so at Law Firm Staff. Law Firm Staff, Inc.'s approach to the hiring process is different. Our founder's story is indicative

of each of our reasons for starting with Law Firm Staff, Inc. While searching for a job himself, Harrison Barnes found that most of the search firms he dealt with failed in two primary respects: 1) they did not care about their candidates and 2) they did not have an understanding of and care about the law firms they were servicing. Harrison saw a need and decided to fill it.

We believe that Law Firm Staff has and continues to emphasize the importance of providing helpful information to both the candidates and the law firms. Law Firm Staff's web site provides very helpful articles for candidates contemplating using our services which are written by our own Law Firm Staff consultants. Law Firm Staff also provides publications for law firms, including The Guide to Personnel Excellence and Choosing A Legal Search Firm. Law Firm Staff has also employed full-time research staff who spend all day researching our law firm clients and updating our research files with the most current information on the law firms with which we deal on a regular basis.

In addition, Law Firm Staff consultants strive to assist both candidates and law firm hiring professionals. We feel it is important to present to law firms an accurate, inclusive profile on every candidate we represent. We also strive to effectively follow-up with our candidates and law firm hiring professionals throughout the process. We take tremendous pride in the fact that we are making a difference in peoples lives, their families' lives and their happiness.

IV. What are the risks I have taken?

Prior to making this transition, each of us had to evaluate the potential risks. The most obvious risk was that we would

fail miserably. But, what does it mean to "succeed" in this position? As mentioned before, one of the primary reasons each of us enjoyed being our recruiting activities while inside firms was the fact that we could help young people with their career goals and hopefully make their lives better along the way. If we feel as though we have been able to effectively help candidates make a positive career change, better their lives and their families' lives and lend them the support they need along the way, we will feel remarkably successful. Likewise, if we feel as though the law firms in which they are placed feel they are receiving high quality, hard working, talented and skilled attorneys who are good people, we will feel remarkably successful. These goals are very similar to the goals we had as firm insiders and remain our primary goals today.

Another more obscure risk was whether we would be able to be an advocate for the candidates we represent. We have found this to be quite easy at Law Firm Staff. Since we seek to represent exceptional candidates and only those we feel the law firms we service would be happy to hire, it is easy to represent them wholeheartedly. As firm insiders, we were accustomed to scrutinizing resumes on behalf of our law firm, always keeping our firms' best interest in mind. But, we were also often straddling the fence, mediating between our law firms and the potential new hire to ensure that the "fit" was right -- for both parties. This is also true for us as staffing consultants. We are still scrutinizing resumes for the best candidates, and we are still trying to mediate between the candidate and the law firms to ensure the best "fit" for both parties.

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Another obvious risk was the potential financial risk we would incur. Thanks to loving and supportive spouses and talented professionals at Law Firm Staff who have provided tremendous support, this has not been an issue. One of the most telling things Harrison said to each of us when we started here was, "Work hard and the rewards will follow." Each of us believes he is right. When your focus is on working hard and helping people, the rewards follow naturally.