

## Building the best team is no easy task

*Not every hire will be a hit, but law firms can't have too many misses*

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Being the managing partner of a law firm is a little like being the coach and general manager of an NHL team.

You build up your roster through the draft and free agency so you can look down the bench no matter what the situation and tap the appropriate people on the shoulder, with full confidence they will give you the best shot of success.

Just like on a hockey roster, not everybody is going to centre the first power-play unit and some people are going to have to grind it out in the corners.

It sounds simple enough but assembling a winning team is far from an exact science. You need chemistry and a fit with the culture, elements that don't necessarily show up on the score sheet or in a grade-point average.

So, where to start? Andrew Feldstein, managing partner of Feldstein Family Law Group in Markham, Ont., is more than happy to go the articling route with many of his new hires.

"I look at it as a 10-month job interview. I find it's an excellent way to see if somebody will fit in from a personality standpoint and it gives me an opportunity to see if they do good quality work," he says.

There is no such luxury with hiring paralegals and law clerks, however. The firm will place ads on its website, elsewhere on the Internet, and via Twitter, but Feldstein often finds it difficult to hire people who will stay for a prolonged period of time.

Because he doesn't get the 10 months to make up his mind on the support staff, he's got a little less patience if they're not grasping the material or fitting in.

"It's better to cut your losses and move on," he says.



When a lawyer leaves the firm, a replacement of equal stature and experience isn't necessarily brought in right away, Feldstein says. If the work flow isn't terribly heavy, adding another salary to the payroll might not be necessary so he'll hire — or not — based on what the firm needs.

No matter how much effort he puts into the hiring process, John McLeish, a partner in McLeish Orlando, a Toronto-based personal injury boutique, says he can't seem to get his batting average up over .600.

He'll start with the basics, such as looking at candidates' resumes, checking references and transcripts and then conducting an interview or two. Once he's down to a shortlist of four or five candidates, the firm will host a social event at a local watering hole to see how they react in a social situation.

"Then we come back that evening or the next morning and try to decide unanimously (who to hire)," he says. "I don't think anybody can do better than 75 per cent."

Part of the final determination is the "lunchtime test." He and his fellow partners ask each other whether they would like eat a sandwich in their lunchroom with each candidate.

"If the person doesn't fit with our culture, I don't think they'll be happy at our firm and I don't think we'll be happy with them. Fit is the No. 1 criteria for us," he says.

And the 40 per cent who are considered failed hires? Sometimes it's their work ethic and other times it's writing mistakes and sub-par work, McLeish says.

"They had us fooled," he says.

Some firms, like Polley Faith, are a little less subtle.

"We have a no-[jerks] policy," says Andrew Faith, a partner with the Toronto-based firm. "We want people who are good people and easy to get along with. We want to keep a good atmosphere."

When looking to hire a lawyer with several years of experience, Faith admits the job interview is a "lousy" way of getting a good sense of what the candidate will be like on the job. He prefers to look at their work history and interests as well as speaking with one or two people who have worked with them previously. He's looking for candidates to have demonstrated leadership and have the ability to speak in front of large groups of people.

"You have to be comfortable talking about different legal issues in front of judges, clients and a gallery of spectators. There is a huge level of confidence that you need in litigation," he says.

For first-year or articling students, he'll take a look at their transcripts but he admits that grades aren't a good predictor of what will make a great litigator.

When he needs to hire a law clerk, Faith looks for somebody with many of the same qualities as a good lawyer, but also the ability to write in plain English, good organizational skills and a high attention to detail. He has developed a succinct method of weeding out the pretenders.

"We look for errors in their resumé. If there's a single typo, we reject it. It sounds pretty harsh but a resumé is the most important document a person can create. If there are mistakes in that, you can only imagine what there will be on a rushed letter that has to go out before deadline on a Friday afternoon," he says.

You can't overemphasize the importance of hiring people who fit in with a firm's culture and staff, says Lorene Nagata, executive director of NagataConnex, a

Toronto-based executive legal search firm. You need go-getters who are builders and bring work in, but you also need people to do it.

“They’re often very different personalities. If you had a department full of only rainmakers, it wouldn’t run very well. The people who are the detail-oriented, technical lawyers tend not to be the rainmakers,” she says.

So, how do you find the right mix? Nagata recommends determining how much work the rainmaker is bringing in and then figuring out the areas of practice that support that work. For example, if plenty of corporate cases are coming in, there is likely to be a need for tax specialists as well as experts in IT and labour.

To increase her odds of success, she spends time with a client to find out not only what is expected of a new hire but with whom they’ll be working. Then she’ll meet with that group to determine what personality type will mesh best with them.

“You can get a great rainmaker but if they don’t have a personality that works well with other people, you’ll never be able to build the department,” she says.

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