



Ask Aliya: How to Find the Best Candidate for Your Law Department

Employment and Labor



Dear Aliya,

I'm looking to staff up the legal department at my organization but I've never had to interview a candidate before. Everyone seems good on paper and I am not sure what the right interview questions are to tease out the ideal candidate. Do you have a list of questions you generally ask?

Donna

Hi Donna,

Staffing up a small company or a small department is always a difficult task. Not only do you want someone who is smart and thoughtful in their work, but you also want to find someone you can spend more than 10 hours a day with. Skill and fit are both important considerations.

When looking to hire a lawyer, you should consider things beyond their ability to analyze. A lawyer working within an organization must operate within the confines of the law, of course, but they must make sound decisions based on an organization's risk tolerance. There are so many legal gray areas when you work in a company; counsel must be able to identify them and consider the complete risks to the enterprise.

That said, there are certain interview questions that can help you gain insight into how the candidate works with management and different business units. Here are my top five:

1. “Describe a mistake you have made and the steps you took to correct it.”

This question can tell you whether a candidate is reflective about their work. A good response here

would be one where the candidate acknowledges they have made mistakes and — most importantly — that they've learned from them. The example should generally be inconsequential and unintentional, but followed by a valuable lesson learned.

2. “What challenges are you looking for in this position?”

I want the people who work with me to be lifelong learners. They should want to be in a role that pushes them further than their current role. The best answer to this question is one where the candidate tells you about the skills they want to use in the position and those they seek to develop. In my opinion, a good counsel will want to develop their business strategy skills. They will be seeking the challenge of working with different business units and different personalities.

3. “What experience has trained you for this industry?”

From this question, I want the candidate to demonstrate that legal skills are transferable skills and that the industry, while relevant, does not define the competence of counsel. It's common for in-house counsel to move from one industry to another and bring transferable legal and business skills. While the initial learning curve in a new industry is steep, good in-house attorneys are able to use their legal skills and business acumen in any industry.

4. “How do you define success?”

The key insight I draw from this question is whether counsel is a team player. Success for in-house counsel means success for the business. It's not about counsel being right and the business unit being wrong — counsel must work with different teams in order to contribute to the overall success of the business. Success is when counsel is a trusted business partner and the different teams know when to and come to counsel for advice or support.

5. “Why do you want to move in-house?”

Sometimes, candidates answer this question with work-life balance. To me, this answer suggests that they don't understand what it means to be counsel. A candidate should be able to articulate that they want to be part of a team or an organization, and that they have an interest in helping the organization fulfil its vision. A great candidate will demonstrate real passion for the company's vision and demonstrate that they have the business acumen for the role.

Hiring for any position is hard but there are certain types of lawyers that make excellent in-house counsel. Good luck with your hiring process and remember personality and fit are just as important as legal and business skills.

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