

Diversity in Legal Recruiting: Best Practices

By Kathy Richardson, Esq.

In my over 20 years as a legal recruiter, I've come to learn that recruiting is a contact sport. There's a war for diverse talent, and there's both an art and a science to winning it.

Legal diversity recruiting is like any other recruiting – there's good recruiting and there's bad recruiting. If you want it to be good, you need to be strategic, intentional, and proactive.

Organizations looking for diverse legal recruiting should start by asking themselves a few questions:

- **Where are you looking for candidates?** If you're looking in the same places you've always looked, you're probably getting the same results you've always gotten.
- **Who are you talking to?** There's the formal recruiting process of going to HR, getting a position description posted, and collecting resumes. Then there's the way people actually get jobs – by networking with the people they know, or what I call the Whisper Network. You need to always be thinking about how you're formally and informally sourcing candidates, including whether you're letting your network know that you value diversity and would like to see diverse candidates.
- **Who's doing your recruiting?** Be conscious of the demographics of your recruiting team because it can significantly impact the impression that candidates in the marketplace have of your firm, especially earlier in their careers. If your interviewing teams aren't diverse, it's going to be harder for you to attract diverse candidates.
- **Is your recruiting passive or active?** Too many employers recruit in a passive way via posting on a job website or their internal site to apply via a portal when they should be proactively reaching out to diverse recruiters or recruiters that have a successful track record for bringing in diverse candidates.

Answering these questions is a critical first step, because great diversity recruiting starts with knowing where you are today and being cognizant of issues that diverse candidates might raise regarding your approach to recruiting. Once you feel like you've laid the foundation for strategic and intentional diversity recruiting, the following best practices will take your efforts to the next level.

- 1. Leverage your networks and get the word out.** Do whatever you can to get the word out that you're prioritizing diversity. That means not only tapping into your diverse networks, but publishing white papers, blogs, and other thought leadership on diversity and promoting those efforts through social media and your recruiting leaders.
- 2. Choose the wording of your job postings carefully.** Language that's commonly used in job postings can be problematic. We get into ruts with the language we use, so it's easy to overlook the fact that words like "leader" or "competitive" or "qualified" can ward off some diverse candidates. Studies have shown that loaded phrases, even ones that might seem innocuous, can reduce the number of diverse candidates who apply to your posting.
- 3. Demand diverse candidates from your headhunters.** If you want

diverse recruiting, insist that your headhunters present you diverse pools. If they're not delivering, ask them to do a specific diversity search that enhances the homogenous applicant pool.

4. Celebrate non-traditional diverse candidates. Focus on appreciating non-traditional credentials and then communicate enthusiasm for those kinds of candidates to your headhunters, explaining why you're championing specific people. Resumes don't always check all the boxes, so it's important to really advocate for the credentials you find most attractive that might be outside the norm.

5. Develop and promote creative diversity projects. Companies are increasingly coming up with unique projects that promote diversity. To remain competitive in the war for diverse talent, you should be doing the same. Once you create them, don't simply let them sit stagnant on your website and assume that people will see them – let the market and your headhunters know about your programs and promote them widely.

6. Take cues from other industries. Diversity recruiting has gained steam in nearly all industries, not just legal. This is leading to a lot of innovation in recruiting – some of which is successful and some of which is not. Stay abreast of the efforts other industries are taking to increase diversity in recruiting and note their pros and cons. There's no reason to reinvent the wheel. Incorporate the successes of others into your practices and avoid their failures if you can.

7. Understand that people talk. Job candidates talk to each other. This is particularly true of diverse candidates, where the pool is small. When you talk to these candidates, you should realize that you're not only talking to them, but also to their friends, colleagues, and other potential candidates you could be recruiting.

8. Establish open communication with your headhunters. When you receive potential candidates, give your headhunters detailed feedback, not just one-word answers. Only when you share exactly what you're looking for will you get the candidates you want – headhunters aren't mind-readers. Nothing kills a deal like time and silence. If you hit delays or hiccups behind the scenes, communicate that. When your headhunters hear nothing, they'll send your candidates to other clients.

At the end of the day, your headhunters want you to succeed, but they need information from you to help you do that. Communication is key.

Often that means having open conversations about topics that may be uncomfortable. Never pretend diversity isn't a hurdle you have to overcome. Successful legal diversity recruiting requires that we normalize conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Once we do, and once you incorporate the tips above for creating strategic and intentional recruiting processes, you'll be in the best position to attract the diverse candidates you want to hire.

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