

TO HIRE OR NOT TO HIRE

Once again, it is time for me to hire a new attorney. As I sift through a large pile of resumes, I realize that a lot of new attorneys might benefit from hearing my selection process.

Hopefully you won't be too shocked by some of the seemingly capricious reasons that I use to reject otherwise qualified applicants. I think many law firms look at the same factors I consider so it would probably benefit you to know some of our secrets.

First, I divide my large pile of applications into two smaller piles: 1) people who sent a cover letter; and 2) people who didn't send a cover letter. Attorneys who send cover letters are going the extra mile, and that is a quality I want in the person I hire.

Next, I go through the cover letter pile and spend some time reading the cover letters and resumes. I immediately trash any application that has an obvious grammar or spelling mistake on the cover letter or resume. Attorneys need to have excellent writing skills and attention to detail to be successful. The associate attorney is an extension of my law firm, and everything they write will be judged by other attorneys.

At this point, there are several other factors that may result in having an application round filed. For example, failing to follow the instructions in our advertisement. Typically I will ask for a resume, writing sample, salary requirement, and indicate the amount of experience that is necessary. If any of those items is lacking, I won't go to the trouble of asking why.

Another thing I look at is the geographical location of the applicant. If they are not within a thirty minute drive, I may be concerned about the long term viability of a commuting attorney. The further away, the more I am concerned. It is a good idea to address that in the cover letter if you think it will be a problem.

Similarly, if there are gaps between law school and admission to the bar, I will be wary of the application. Once again, a quick explanation in the cover letter will impress me more than the person who tries to hide the gap. I had a law clerk that failed to pass the bar the first time and he ended up being a partner in my firm less than five years later. In that instance, we knew why he didn't pass, he was working full time as a law clerk to feed his family and very few people can pass the bar without taking some time off.

Short stints of employment are the next thing I look for in a prospective candidate. Nobody wants to spend a year or two training someone and then find out that they have itchy feet. In addition, it raises the question as to whether or not the person was terminated for poor performance. If there are gaps in employment, then I wonder if there were a series of jobs that they don't want to disclose. This is a more difficult problem for an applicant to correct. My best

advice is try to stick with your first job for at least two years before moving on and be prepared to explain why you left in the interview.

Once I have weeded out applications I don't want to consider for the reasons listed above, I go through the remaining applications, comparing and contrasting them to each other. Was the writing sample solid? Was the cover letter generic or was it relevant to our particular job offering? Were there any noteworthy awards or publications? Were they high achievers in school? Are there any special interests or activities that they listed that would make them a good match for our law firm?

I would like to make a comment about your writing sample. Please do not submit one unless it is at least 95% your own work. If I hire someone after reading their brilliant brief, and then I find out they can't even write a simple business letter, I will probably terminate their employment. Don't put yourself in that position.

My once rather large pile of applications is now very small. I have my office manager reach out to the attorneys to schedule interviews. Not surprising, I have a list of things I look for during interviews that could make or break the candidate.

First, if they are rude or dismissive of my office manager or anyone else they come into contact with, they will not be considered for the position. It is imperative in my law firm that attorneys treat other staff with respect.

My next requirement is that they be on time and dressed appropriately. I also expect that the person will have a professional handshake and look me in the eye when they talk to me and that they will speak in a confident tone. Surprisingly, many candidates look at the ground or at the wall when they speak. Others are so nervous during the interview that it becomes uncomfortable for both of us. If you get nervous, get together with a group of friends and practice, practice, practice!

One other thing that will help you with your interview, always answer the questions truthfully. Don't just say what you think the interviewer wants to hear. I have been an attorney for twenty-four years, and I feel that I am an expert at spotting BS. However, it doesn't hurt to know a little bit about the law firm and be able to explain why you want to work there as opposed to other law firms with openings.

Hopefully it goes without saying that you will bring at least one copy of everything you submitted in your application to the interview in case there is a second interviewer. Being prepared is always a good look on an applicant!

Finally, after you ace the interview, your job isn't complete. Always follow up with a letter or email thanking the interviewers for their time. Refer to the interviewers by name and check your grammar and spelling, you don't want to blow it so late in the process.

Good luck and maybe I'll see you soon!

Daniel Stevens has interviewed hundreds of attorneys and hired over seventy as the hiring partner for a medium sized law firm and then more recently as the managing partner for his smaller boutique plaintiff's employment law firm, Stevens & McMillan. For more information, please visit his [employment lawyer](#) website.