

Law Firm Recruiting: A Mirror on The Present and a Door to the Future

By Robert E. Williams

At Sheppard Mullin, as at most large law firms, recruiting law students and lateral attorneys consumes significant amount of energy and money. And it should. The practice of law is a service profession, and a law firm can only be as good in delivering service to its clients as the caliber of its lawyers. But it is possible to go about recruiting in a perfunctory — albeit expensive — manner: go to the best law schools; make offers to the people with the best grades; and hope that those who accept will succeed.

A better approach is to consider recruiting in the context of the firm's human resource strategy. The firm's approach to recruiting should be guided by a thoughtful analysis of the types of lawyers the firm wants to hire. At Sheppard Mullin, our objective is to hire people who are

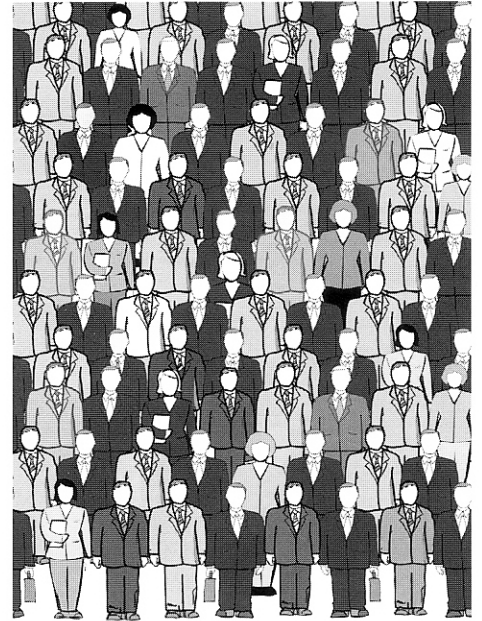
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not only highly capable, but are likely to succeed in our firm. These people will provide long-term service to our clients, and carry our firm into future generations. We take this objective seriously; we elected 10 of our associates to partnership last year, notwithstanding the global economic crisis.

Screening for high academic achievement is a given. We look for people whose academic performance puts them in the top segment of their law school class. But screening for predictors

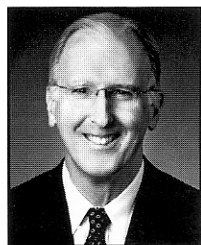
of long-term success leads us to look for other characteristics, as well. It is important for the entering lawyer to have an accurate perception of what life in a big law firm is going to be like — as to both the type of work and the depth of commitment to work that is expected. We take in many successful lawyers who are the first in their families to practice law, or even to go to college. But all have demonstrated that they know what they are getting into, and that they are likely to thrive, over the long haul, in the atmosphere of our firms' offices. Skill at communication, and especially an affinity for writing, is critical. So are leadership experience and the capacity to be a self-starter. Perhaps most of all, we look for a capacity for sustained hard work, as part of a team, to achieve the objectives sought by our clients.

Recruiting can also be a springboard to improvement of a firm's human resources practices. At Sheppard Mullin, we don't want to succeed only at hiring the outstanding candidates we identify — we want to keep them and convert them, as efficiently as possible, into respected, long-term contributors to our clients' success. This has led to a number of steps aimed at increased retention of the lawyers we hire: (a) an improved system of delivery of timely and candid performance evaluation, by matching every associate with a "partner advisor" from his or her practice group; (b) a system of professional development planning, in which each



associate maps out a concrete strategy of career development each year, with advice from his or her partner advisor; (c) a revamped system of professional education, in which training is delivered on-line, on demand, 24/7, and covers not only substantive legal skills but also skills in networking and client communications; and (d) an enhanced diversity and inclusion program, with a full-time manager of diversity and internal "affinity groups" for women attorneys, attorneys of color and LGBT attorneys.

Recruiting therefore provides an opportunity to do much more than fill a law firm's immediate needs for talent. It gives a firm a chance to look at itself in the mirror, evaluate the characteristics of lawyers who succeed, and screen candidates for those characteristics. It also should prompt a firm to enhance opportunities for long-term success for the people who are hired, in order to propel the firm into the future.



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