How to develop a rock star team

By Wendy Witt

Ugh. Hiring isn’t anyone’s favorite task. This article will improve your odds of hiring the right person at the right time for the right seat – and developing them into a rock star team member.

Allow yourself a little grace for past mistakes and let’s map out the steps to make good things happen from here on out. The only way to do more of the work you love, have a healthy work-life balance, and make more money is to invest in leverage (i.e. help).

1. Need Analysis

Your first step is to determine who you should hire when via your Service Analysis Worksheet.

I chose a trust-based estate plan to illustrate. This is simply a table inserted in a Word document. If you love Excel, you can program the math.

BONUS: As you use this tool, in addition to identifying who to hire when, you’ll also identify whether: you’re billing appropriately, the team’s workload is on target, to invest in additional/less office space, work is being pushed down to the lowest paid competent person, and you’ve documented efficient work flows.

Don’t get distracted if your processes, times, or type of cases are different than those illustrated. This works for all areas of practice – even litigation.

• Complete the Service Analysis Worksheet for each of your most common services.
• List the big picture tasks for each step of the process of fulfilling this service.
• Identify the lowest paid competent role to complete each task.
• Jot down how long, on average, it takes the person in this role to fulfill the task. Yes, time tracking needs to be consistent in all firms.
• Add up the hours for the tasks of each role per month for each service.
• Multiply by the number of these same services you provide each month.
• Add the hour totals of all common services for each role.
• Observe where you need more support, and make the decision to hire.

To keep it simple and as an example, if your firm does 15 trust-based estate plans on average per month with no other services, the paralegal role has 157.5 hours in one month. This is 39.36 hours per week which is too high for one person – plus – there’s no room for growth. Hire way before you’re desperate and your current team is exhausted and ready to quit. Look to hire at least 3 months before you anticipate needing that help.

2. Advertising

Okay, so you’ve decided to hire a paralegal; let’s announce to the world that you’re ready to hire!

• Advertise your firm’s culture to self-eliminate peeps who aren’t a good fit.
• List required credentials.
• Set high standards in your call to action giving specific instructions. For example, “To apply for this position, do not click the button, instead upload both your resume showing the word ORANGE as your middle name on your resume and your video at lawfirmteambuilding.com.”
• Request applicants upload a video explaining why they’re excited to work at your firm and delete any applicants who don’t follow instructions. How you do anything is how you do everything; if they won’t follow directions now, they won’t follow directions later.

3. Hiring Process Best Practices Checklist

This is cool; you’re on the verge of having the help you need to get you closer to where you want to be. Let’s select the next member of your work family.

If you have a leader such as a COO, law firm administrator, or team lead, have them conduct initial interviews of the applicants who meet the required qualifications and followed application instructions. Of course, they need to be first trained on how to do this; conducting interviews is a learned skill. Ask questions that let you know whether candidates truly have experience doing what they say they have.

Ask questions that show whether candidates take responsibility for and learn from mistakes such as “What would the person who liked you best at your previous position say is your worst quality?” and “What would the person who
liked you least at your previous position say is your best quality?” If there’s any blaming circumstances or people outside of themselves for failures, it’s a red flag and the interview is over.

Ask questions that show how they adapt to shifting priorities such as “How do you organize your work day?” followed up with “What do you do when you have to adjust those plans?”

For the applicants who appear to be a good fit, have them take the KolbeA or Disc work personality tests so you can be sure they’re being authentic about how they work as well as strengths and weaknesses. Paralegals and most support staff need to be worker bees who crank the wheel and do the same task over-and-over again. For a paralegal, you’d be looking for strong results of red and blue (which represent fact finder and follow through) on the KolbeA. If using the Disc test for a paralegal, look for SC (steadiness and compliance) personality types.

In exchange for a per diem, have the final candidates do the job for a day. Set up tasks checking for specific attributes and knowledge as well as grammar and punctuation skills. A full day provides an opportunity for the team to interact with them and for the candidate to do the actual job.

Hiring team members with good judgment and growing that judgment is how your firm prospers. Focus on the four Cs when hiring: character, coachability; chemistry, competency:

• Consider character to be the most important value. Do the candidate’s ethics, personality and core align with your firm? If no, stop and dismiss that candidate. If yes, move on.

• Look for people who take in feedback and adjust their behavior; they own their performance with no excuses. These people take self-responsibility and have coachability. If no, stop and dismiss that candidate. If yes, move on.

• The next most important factor is chemistry. Is this candidate a cultural fit that is right for the firm, team and clients? If no, stop and dismiss that candidate. If yes, move on.

• Is the candidate competent? Keeping in mind that you can train to fit your specific needs, does the candidate have the technical knowledge and does their experience align for good judgment in the role you’re filling? If no, stop and dismiss that candidate. If yes, move on.

As the CEO, you provide final approval.


Start off on the right foot by being the leader and mentor you always wished for.

Have a welcome party for each new team member! Signs, coffee and donuts, balloons, flowers, desk gifts, firm t-shirt and all things fun. You are welcoming a human being into your work family and they will excel when they feel welcome, supported and part of the team.

Everything needs to be ready before they walk in the door: onboarding and training schedule, equipment, supplies, desk, onboarding manual with basic firm knowledge and organizational chart with job descriptions and example tasks, training materials (including video), performance scorecard and discussions with team members to share the best way to work together.

5. Retaining Process Best Practices Checklist

You’ve got a winner, so give them what they need to be successful.

Continue training and investing in your employees. Your team needs to know you care about them and their careers. Manage your team providing priorities, guidance, feedback and accountability. If you have trained team leaders, this is their job.

Set up monthly 1:1 growth coaching sessions with each team member. This is 30 minutes of 1:1 time with you monthly (or quarterly, if you have a large team) to share your vision for your team members’ career arc and chat about their goals and what they need to be successful.

Measure and bonus what you want more of. For example, if you want documents turned around in 3 business days provide a bonus for every quarter the paralegal meets the 3-day turnaround mark with 95% accuracy 95% of the time.

Be a leader worth following. Focus on and share your blue-sky vision inviting your team to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Dedicate yourself to your own personal development, be specific and consistent, set high standards and hold people to those standards.

When you follow these checklists, you’ll have a stronger chance of getting the right person in the right seat with a much lower chance of hiring someone who will only last a few weeks or months. Bad hires costs real money – typically about six months of salary, so your investment in getting it right and keeping it right has a strong return on investment. You can do this.

Wendy Witt serves as a law firm business strategist and small business/estates attorney. She is the founder of Million Dollar Attorney, a private consulting firm designed to help the owners of solo and small law firms build million-dollar law firms that give them the life they love. You can reach her at Wendy@MillionDollarAttorney.com.