

Oregon Law Practice Management

Practice Management Tips for Oregon Lawyers



Know Who You Hire

The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.

Love him or hate him, this quote from [Dr. Phil](#) says it all when it comes to hiring legal support staff.

Before joining the [Professional Liability Fund](#) in 1996, I operated the [Multnomah Bar Association's](#) Legal Placement Service. During my tenure, I interviewed and screened thousands of potential applicants. We did not place lawyers, but we filled every other available position in a law office or legal setting.

My experience at the [MBA](#) taught me many things, not the least of which was the importance of checking references.

Applicants can be very charming, professional, and appear to have spot-on experience. In fact, they may truly possess all these qualities. But none of this really predicts how well they will do on-the-job. The only way to find out is to check references.

By contacting former employers you may learn that your charming applicant is an embezzler, exaggerated his experience, or threw a plant at her former boss. (I did.)

This is not to say that there is an abundance of poor candidates - far from it. The point is: you need to know who you are hiring.

With the caveat that I am not an employment or labor law specialist, here are some questions you might ask of a reference:

- What position did this employee hold at your firm?
- When did the employee work for you?
- Can you describe the employee's responsibilities?
- Why did the employee leave your firm?

- Was the employee dependable and reliable? Did he/she have any issues with absenteeism or tardiness?
- Did any personal problems affect this employee's work performance?
- Did the employee communicate well orally and in writing?
- How would you describe the employee's clerical/secretarial skills? Did he/she turnaround work quickly? Was the employee's work product accurate?
- Did the employee take instruction well? Did he/she seem to grasp new responsibilities quickly?
- Did he/she get along well with others in the firm?
- Did the employee have contact with clients? If so, did he/she ever encounter angry or upset clients? How did he/she respond?
- How did the employee handle pressure? Stress?
- Did the employee make sound and timely decisions?
- Was this employee a self-starter?
- What do you think is this employee's strongest quality?
- Is there an area this employee could improve upon?
- Do you think this employee will perform well as a [job title]?
- How would you describe the employee's overall performance?
- Would you re-hire the employee?
- Is there anything of significance you'd like to add?

Don't underestimate the importance of being systematic in your approach to hiring. Develop a set of questions to ask references [and applicants](#), then create and use forms or checklists to ensure that your hiring process is thorough and consistent. You won't be sorry!

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