

McKenna Long's Recruiting Couch

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Forget dazzling law firms with your fabulous grades, law review note, or Dalai Lama internship. These days, firms also want assurance that you have the "right stuff"--the psychological makeup--for survival and success at the firm.

Quietly, some firms have been deploying "behavior" or "competence" interviews to assess candidates. Typically, candidates are grilled about the challenges they've faced, their working style, and their problem-solving abilities. The early adapters of this form of interview were Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe and DLA Piper, according to [The Legal Intelligencer](#). Since then, a bunch of other firms, including [Baker Botts](#); [Paul, Hastings](#); and [Vinson & Elkins](#), have followed suit.



But one firm, [McKenna Long & Aldridge](#), has gone even further. Besides those probing "behavior" questions, the firm requires that recruits take a psychological test as part of their callbacks. I talked with [Jennifer Queen](#), the firm's head of recruiting and development, about this latest interview technique.

Psychological testing sounds pretty extreme. What's the reason for it?

We started looking into [how we hire associates] back in 2007 when the salary increases hit. The salary was at \$160,000 in D.C., and there were rumors that it might go to \$180,000. That's serious money. We're a business, and want to invest in candidates the right way.

Did the firm feel it wasn't getting its money's worth from the people it had hired?

I did a presentation about the cost of attrition. When we went through the individual hires over the years, we found we had missed some red flags. I thought there had to be a better way to [screen candidates] than the typical 20-minute interview process.

What models did you look at for this "better way"?

I looked at the way companies screen. Some are extreme--they put candidates through simulations and interviews with psychologists. [See post on [Goldman Sachs's interviewing style](#).] I looked at many assessment [providers], and picked Talent Quest.

So what's the interview drill now?

There's the on-campus interview, where we look at the package of grades and experience. For the callback, we ask for a writing sample, and we ask candidates to do an online assessment test that takes 30 minutes. Then they come in, and lawyers are designated to ask certain questions--like "Tell me about the time you shared credit for an accomplishment," or "the time you worked with someone you had a disagreement with."

Whoa--let's go back to that assessment test. Can you flunk it?

There's no perfect score.

What kind of questions are on the test?

Team player is one of our assessments. If someone says, "It's all about me," that's a red flag. And if someone says, "I play tennis but hate playing doubles," that's a sign.

But that sounds like there are right and wrong answers. Seems like if you are too honest--or just don't play doubles well--you'll be penalized.

Even though the assessment might say you are not a team player, you can still show that you are self-aware [of that trait] and that you are willing to learn.

Won't this type of screening result in more homogeneous recruits--where everyone comes up with the same "correct" answers?

I think the opposite is true. You actually dig more because you're not just relying on what's on the resume. You look at [the candidate's] experience in a different way. . . . Someone can talk about how their waitressing experience was valuable in learning how to deal with different people.

Won't law students be turned off by this extra test?

At first, we were concerned that we'd be labeled as the weird firm. But [so far] only one student has questioned the assessment.

Can you measure the benefits so far?

It's hard to say. This is a market where people aren't leaving. But from the quality of comments I get [from interviewers], it's a much more thoughtful process. I think you have to be making better decisions as a result.

Are firms knocking down your door, begging to learn about this new interview technique?

No. Some people in my position [as recruiting director] are interested, but not firm management.

Why not?

I think they are concerned with stigma--what will [candidates] think of us? They don't want to be different. We now have a market where firms could be more creative [about hiring], but lawyers don't thrive on change.

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