

Where to Find Great Law Firm Job Candidates — Right Now



Your firm's success depends on hiring stellar law firm job candidates for your associate and staff roles. There is no question that the hiring market has been turned on its head by COVID-19 and The Great Resignation. This evolution means firms with 30 or fewer employees now generally find qualified candidates by using a multi-tiered approach and increased flexibility around salary and benefits.

The Pandemic's Lasting Impact

"COVID first brought a complete hiring freeze, then 2021 saw incredible movement and competition," says Michele Fivel, partner in global legal recruiting firm Major, Lindsey & Africa in Hanover, MD. Firms offered never-before-seen signing bonuses and full year-end bonuses and grew much less stringent about prestige schools and associates' grades.

Hiring practices have normalized in 2022, Fivel says, but adds that the talent pool for law firm job candidates is smaller than in previous years. That's because experienced legal professionals looking to make a move did so during 2021's Great Resignation. Many associates and staffers who moved during that time signed retention bonuses and **claw-back provisions** keeping them in their current positions.

Where to Find Great Hires Now

Firms in **Smokeball's Law + The Great Resignation survey** were most likely to seek out candidates for their attorney and staff roles on traditional job search sites (78% use this method), while 56% relied on referrals and 17% on recruiters. These numbers add up to more than 100%, because firms are using a mix of tactics.

That's a great way of maximizing your chances of finding the ideal fit, says Andrea Vacca, of Vacca Family Law Group in New York City. "You've got to reach out to your network, post it on the job boards, and publicize it on your social media feeds," she says. "You never know where your ideal candidate will come from." Vacca recently hired a client relations director from a firm that was downsizing. If she hadn't been networking, she would never have known the person was available.

Because the available talent pool is smaller than ever, personal connections are crucial in the hiring process. "By far the best way to find hires is through word of mouth," says Mark O'Mara, founder of O'Mara Law Group in Orlando, Fla. Vacca suggests "reaching out to people you respect and admire who are currently working in jobs like the one you are looking to fill. Not to poach them, but to see if they have colleagues with similar experience who may be interested in your position."

While job boards and recruiting firms help you cast a wider net for law firm job candidates, don't forget that eager candidates are available at law schools around the country. Lily Y. Hughes, assistant dean of career services at Syracuse University College of Law, points out that law school career offices offer many of the same benefits as job boards but with no cost. Career services offices provide a limited roster of candidates (students and alumni from one school), but recruitment events allow you to meet many candidates in a short period of time.

Job Post Wording Is Key

No matter where you list your attorney and staff positions, the wording of the postings has a tremendous impact on your results. Fivel suggests that the most important element is what she calls "the sell." "Isolate what it is about your firm that will make an employee want to work there, and paint that picture in your listing." Considering relocation hires, people with related (but not direct) experience to your primary practice areas or out-of-state hires also increases your candidate pool.

Vacca suggests firms "view the job listing as a marketing tool. Just as you market your firm to your ideal client, you need to market the job to your ideal candidate." She recently hired a senior associate to handle non-litigated divorce; the job listing emphasized the role would be perfect for someone seeking a lower-pressure position that didn't include litigation. Vacca quickly found an ideal candidate.

Hughes says it's important to make job postings exciting. "Answer the question 'why should you come work for us?' rather than just saying you're hiring." Candidates are looking for a culture, not just a job. Emphasize hybrid schedules, benefits and lifestyle advantages of your firm.

Manage the hiring process

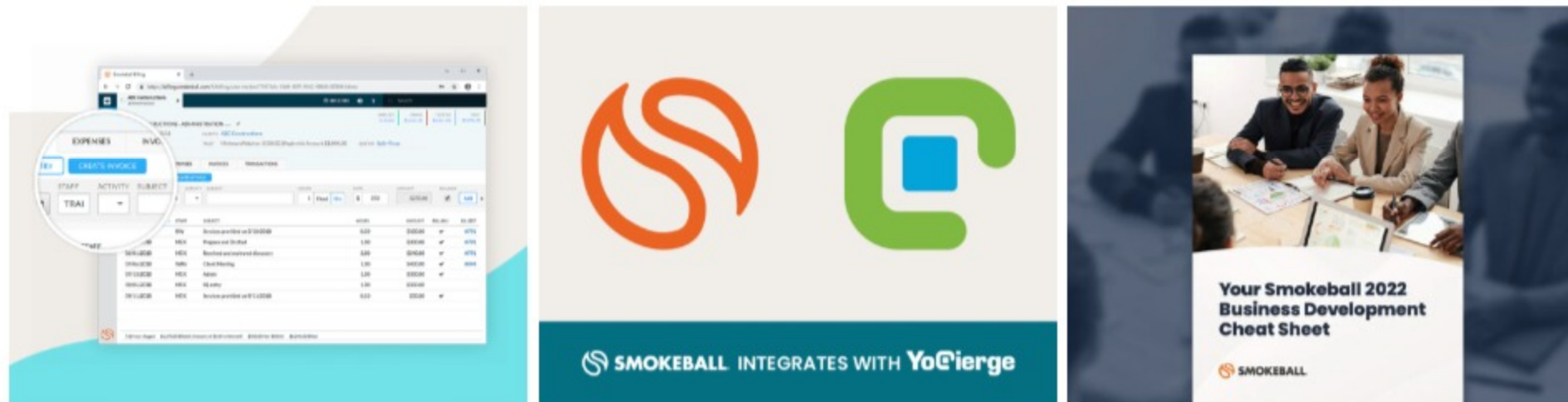
Smokeball's survey found firms most often take one to two months to fill a role, and the negotiation process takes one to five business days.

"When using job boards," Vacca says, "expect to get hundreds of unqualified candidates applying for the job. Have someone on your staff sort them into candidates that appear to be qualified vs. those who clearly aren't." She rejects candidates who do not follow her very specific instructions, narrowing down the prospects and streamlining the interview process.

Communication is key to a successful hiring process. "Complete transparency about the firm's goals and position are crucial," Fivel says. Clear communication about the firm's values is key in the interview process so that candidates know what to expect and can evaluate if they are a good fit. And if you're delayed in moving forward with a hire, inform the recruiter or candidate to maintain the relationship — and the candidate's interest.

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