

The Perfect fit



It was a busy afternoon and Karen was swamped. Her entire staff was entrenched in cases, and one of her best researchers was about to go on maternity leave. Karen's already manic schedule was now being crammed with interviews for the temporary replacement by the firm's human resources department. And Karen, being a seasoned veteran of the firm's law library, knew what this meant: a long, hard struggle to identify someone with the skills required to jump in and make a contribution to the firm with minimal hand-holding. As Karen checked the clock, logged off of the network, and walked to the lobby to greet yet another candidate proffered by HR, she did so with a sigh of resignation.

Using specialized resources to enhance the talent in your library

By Tori Covington and Diane M. Goldstein

Another wasted hour, she thought, as she forced a tense smile and offered her hand to the fourth unqualified candidate of the week.

It's a fictitious account, but the theme is one I hear repeatedly among law library staff everywhere: *I spend too much time finding temporary help that doesn't have the skills I need*. Myriad situations can prevent a library staff from procuring the necessary talent as efficiently as possible. Perhaps the human resources department holds the keys to the hiring process, and, while it may know how to identify an excellent paralegal candidate, the highly specialized needs of the legal library are often misunderstood. Or, it could be that there isn't someone on the library staff who really knows how to articulate the skills needed in the library in a well-written job description. Perhaps a lack of knowledge about where to recruit individuals with the right skills is holding them back. Limited success could also result from the fact that the law library staff cannot ethically go to the most qualified pool of talent: those who are already working.

To make matters worse, when staffing needs are critical and urgent, spending time to train a temporary worker is the last thing the library staff can handle. "Temporary workers are usually needed to replace staff who are on long-term absences, and budgets and personal situations may prevent us from bringing the temporary worker on to be trained for a week or so before they're really needed," says Agnes Mattis, head of corporate library for Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP in New York. "I am already down a person, and there is no time to train them. They have to come in with a big set of skills."

More and more, library managers are turning to the services of recruiting firms to locate the candidates they need. It's becoming apparent that accessing the skills of an outside resource can be a wise investment, considering the vast amount of time it takes to find, screen, hire, and orient a candidate—not to mention additional time to re-find, re-screen, re-hire, and re-orient a replacement because the first one didn't work out. In every major metropolitan area, there seems to be a staffing firm on every corner. So how do you know which one to choose? Are recruiting skills the same across skill sets? How do you know which firm is going to provide the best candidates?

Firms Specializing in Information Management

For a New York City library manager of a large, international firm, using a staffing company that specializes in information management recruiting is

the best investment. "With a specialty firm, I don't have to explain what I need or detail the types of functions the person will be doing. I don't have to educate the recruiter," says the manager, who asked to remain anonymous. "I can concentrate on my regular job: assisting lawyers, paying bills, all the other aspects of my job that don't stop."

Mattis learned pretty quickly that it takes a recruiter with some library experience to understand and procure the skills she needed. "When I used a traditional, commercial staffing firm, they sent me someone who had library experience, but clearly the firm didn't understand what I truly needed," she says. "While I expect some level of training, I spent more time babysitting. The temporary staff needs to come in with a set of skills ready to go."

Firms specializing in the information management sector are, by and large, staffed and run by experienced librarians, records managers, or other information management professionals. And this gives these specialized staffing firms an edge when it comes to serving your library staffing needs. Consider this: they have worked in libraries before, and they understand the unique needs of corporate libraries versus academic libraries versus government libraries; they essentially speak your language.

What a Specialty Firm Can Do For You

As a specialty recruiter for an information management staffing firm, I've seen all the ways clients have struggled to fill positions in their libraries. Commonly, the HR department can hamper the search for a good candidate because their internal recruiters may not understand the unique needs of the library. A well-intentioned HR representative often sends a train of good candidates—or at least those who look good on paper. After the head of the library has a five-minute conversation with them, however, it's clear that they lack the law library knowledge and understanding required to make an immediate impact, or even to keep the library from falling behind.

Often, simply by forging better relationships with the HR department, library managers can introduce the idea of using a specialized staffing firm. It happens when the library manager acknowledges the core competency of the HR recruiters to source talent that's more often needed in a law firm, but explains tactfully that the information management field has much more specialized needs and convinces the HR department that an outside resource can help. When human resources agrees to

try it and sees that placements made by the specialty firm fit better, stay longer, and produce better work, it is easy for HR to see the long-range benefits to the firm as a whole.

Sometimes a library manager's recruiting sources become stale. He or she may run the same online ad in the same places and get the same disappointing response for lack of other options. A specialty firm's advantage here is its breadth of resources, including candidates who aren't even looking for another opportunity. For example, the New York City library manager appreciates that a specialty firm can recruit from pools of candidates not necessarily looking for work. "I can't call my competitors and try to recruit their staff, but a third-party recruiter can," she says, "especially when they have good relationships and a strong network of information management workers."

A specialty firm can also serve as a consultant. Simple tweaks to a job description can sometimes make a huge difference in response. And the personnel in an information management staffing firm has the expertise to suggest the kinds of changes that freshen up a job description, paint a more vivid picture of the skills required, and help clients get the talent they need, when they need it.

Another advantage of using a specialty firm is its role as an intermediary should a temporary position become an offer for employment—or if the need is for a new direct-hire staff member. "Sometimes the candidate can ask for last-minute requests that may be unreasonable," says the New York City library manager. Having a neutral third party involved in the negotiation—one who knows what the market will bear—can help steer clients toward fair and mutually beneficial employment arrangements. "Besides," says the library manager, "you never know when you might need a recruiter to help you find your next job, and the way your firm negotiates can help you size up its quality."

Finally, working with a specialized staffing firm is an investment that results in longer-term time and cost savings. Consider the time a library manager may spend on the recruiting and hiring process interviewing, corresponding with the candidates, tracking applicants, checking references and backgrounds, and writing and running ads. The time spent on these activities can be dramatically reduced when an information management staffing firm is involved, and the costs can actually be offset or reduced when a specialized staffing service becomes an extension of your firm's hiring process for information management positions.

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Choosing a Firm

There are a handful of specialty services firms around the country that understand the needs of the information industry. And in many cases, your initial conversations with the firms you vet can reveal quite a lot about the quality and expertise of each. A good specialty firm will seek fine details about your organization, the position you're filling, and may ask probing questions that help you go beyond generalities into specifics about the desired skills, personality, and experience of the ideal candidate. Good recruiters understand that it is just as important to match a candidate's personality to your culture as to match their skills to your needs.

The duties of the law library are important and the demands of the job are intense. Keeping your library staffed with the most talented, qualified personnel is absolutely essential in the competitive legal world. Your strength is in supporting your internal constituents; an information management staffing firm's strength is in sourcing that all-important talent so you can focus on your core responsibilities. ■

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