

How to Evaluate Resumes

Submitted By Donna Flamm

Donna Flamm is a recruiting manager for Robert Half® Legal, a leading staffing service specializing in the placement of attorneys, paralegals and other legal professionals with law firms and corporate legal departments. Robert Half Legal has offices in major cities throughout the United States, including five offices in the St. Louis area. For more information, contact Donna at 314-621-2223

You've placed the job listing, received responses and now you have a stack of resumes to review. Whether you have fifteen or fifty candidates to evaluate, the process can be challenging. After all, you don't want to overlook a "diamond in the rough," but you also don't want to waste time bringing in unqualified individuals for interviews.

While there are no sure-fire ways to identify the best potential employees, there are techniques that can help when assessing resumes. Start by managing the process yourself. You have the best idea of what you're seeking in a candidate, so try to make time to review all incoming applications. Here are a few others suggestions to consider:

Know what you're looking for

Before you begin reviewing resumes, clarify the job requirements for the position. Which qualifications and attributes are essential? What are less critical but desired skills? For example, you may prefer to hire a paralegal who possesses a college degree but would be willing to consider someone with equivalent work experience.

Be sure you apply the same standards as you screen each resume. You need to give everyone fair consideration while narrowing the pool of applicants.

Understand resume styles

There are different things you should look for depending on the type of resume submitted. The most common format is chronological, in which the most recent work experience is listed first, followed by previous jobs. When reviewing this kind of resume, pay close attention to the dates of employment and gaps in work history. If you have any concerns, ask about them during the interview. Be cautious, but keep in mind there's usually a reasonable explanation, such as a layoff or time spent raising a family. The other resume style – functional – is organized based on skills and expertise. With this format, you should look for vague job descriptions (e.g., "worked with legal documents") or the omission of a complete work history. Functional resumes are sometimes used when an applicant has an unstable employment record or lacks experience.

Judge the resume's appearance

Professionalism and attention to detail are critical in any law office, so make sure to carefully consider the way a resume looks. A candidate who doesn't proofread for formatting issues, typos and misspellings during the application process is likely to exhibit the same behavior on the job.

Question the unclear

After reviewing the resume, you should have a solid idea of what an applicant accomplished at previous employers. If you're not sure what an individual did as a "special projects coordinator," ask the candidate to provide further information when you speak with him or her.

Also take note of ambiguous wording, such as "participated in" and "familiar with." Is the applicant an expert in conducting legal research through LexisNexis or has she only used the program a couple of times? Was he an active member of the team selecting the

firm's new database software or did he simply attend a few related meetings?

Read it all

The cover letter can be just as informative as the resume, so take the time to review it carefully. You'll often learn additional details about a candidate's background, as well as why he or she thinks she's a good match for the position. You'll also be able to evaluate the individual's written communication skills.

Screen top candidates

Finally, save yourself valuable time by conducting brief phone interviews. Five- or ten-minute screening calls will allow you to clarify any issues and get a better sense of the applicants' skills and experience before scheduling more extensive face-to-face meetings.

With a little practice you'll find that it becomes easier to quickly and effectively evaluate resumes. The key is to set clear standards, review each document thoroughly and pay attention to any warning signs of potential problems. You'll help identify the best individuals to interview and get your hiring process off to a positive start.