

If I was... trying to hire the best in-house lawyer

Dimitri Mastrocola is a partner and leader of the financial services practice at Major, Lindsey & Africa, a legal recruiting firm, and recruits senior in-house counsel for the world's leading organisations. Here, he places himself in the position of someone seeking to hire the best in-house lawyer:

Dimitri Mastrocola

If I was a general counsel or senior legal hiring manager looking to find the best in-house lawyer, I would consider using a legal search firm because hiring for the legal function is not a core competency of most corporate HR and internal recruiting teams.

I would remember that there is a huge difference between the “best candidate on the market” and the “best candidate in the market” and I would want a specialist with an extensive network of attorney contacts they can draw on. I would want someone able to find that exceptional “passive” candidate who is happily employed but could be persuaded to move.

Next, I would be concerned about cultural and personality fit and would need an unbiased appraisal of each candidate's strengths and weaknesses and an honest discussion about fit.

I would also, at the outset, think through my ideal candidate profile. The key criteria would be legal experience and education; softer

skills, such as communication, judgment, teamwork and initiative; and personality, attitude and cultural fit. As the search unfolds, the “talent market” – that is, potential candidates approached about the opportunity – will tell me how attractive the role is.

If the market's message is that the job will be hard to fill, I must be prepared to revisit the candidate profile and adjust items such as qualifications, compensation, and location of the role.

I would also select the interview team with great care. Most lawyers have excellent question-and-answer skills and can play the interview game to perfection – possibly overstating or overselling their skills. I would want the company to use strong interviewers who can drill down into a well-crafted CV, read between the lines and assess a candidate's substantive legal experience and critical soft skills.

I would value decisiveness over consensus in making the final hiring decision. Some companies pride themselves on having a consensus-driven culture.

But while input from the various

internal constituencies to be served by the new in-house counsel should be considered, I would allow only one person to make the final hiring decision. In the case of hiring a general counsel, for example, this person would be the chief executive.

Many companies make the mistake of starting to check references only once the interview process is complete, but I would begin this earlier. If the references turn out to be weak, the search might have to go back to square one.

I would expect the legal search firm to begin to evaluate potential candidates at the start of a search using their vetting processes and databases – because with this “inside information” at my fingertips I can quickly rule out candidates who otherwise appear qualified on paper.

Finally, I would make sure the candidates' expectations about compensation and reporting structure are well managed throughout the interview process so that we avoid any last-minute surprises that can derail the process.