

# Storytelling and Collaboration to Advance DEI in Lateral Recruiting

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As search firm recruiters, we are uniquely situated to tell our candidate's story in a compelling way. We bring value by diving into their journey and experiences to present a full picture of what they offer as an attorney and colleague. There are specific actions we can take as search firm recruiters. This strategic approach applies to lateral attorneys at all levels across Am Law 200 firms, regional firms and boutiques, and can be most effective for counsel and junior partners building their practices. How do we promote DEI through the lateral attorney recruitment process? Here, we will explore intentional strategies for search firm and law firm recruiters to collaboratively increase diversity in lateral recruiting.

## **Take the time to really know your candidate**

Search firm recruiters can help increase a diverse candidate's chances of being considered and ultimately hired by taking the time to learn their story. Start by engaging your candidate in a thorough intake conversation that takes you in a variety of directions. Ask questions, *actively* listen, follow up and understand their story.

Do they mention an affinity group membership on LinkedIn that was not included in their resume? Ask why. Are they the first in their family to attend college? What does this accomplishment mean to them? Did family obligations require them to scale back their practice or leave altogether and now they are trying to reenter? What do they see as their biggest challenge in making this transition?

Are they downplaying the size of their book of business? Why? Could they increase their billing rate? Are there elements of their personal story that highlight their work ethic and ability to generate business? Do they have a record of business generation without receiving adequate credit?

After you learn your candidate's story, you can shape it in a way that will increase their attractiveness to a law firm. Doing so enables you to identify their key talking points with the firm. If relevant to the candidacy, you can also use this information to begin sketching out a business plan early in the process.

## **Identify firms that would be an excellent match**

When identify firms, the magic happens when you dig deeper into the matchmaking. Naturally, we look for a good fit in terms of a firm's practice area and substantive needs, but we can push into other key factors and metrics.

Increasing opportunity at law firms ultimately starts with leadership. What does the executive committee and other members of firm leadership look like? Is it diverse? What is their story? Are they "lififers" or have they moved around and understand what it means to be a lateral? What are their backgrounds? Does this firm have a record of supporting and promoting attorneys from diverse backgrounds?

Many of us have access to incredible research tools that provide helpful information in a matter of seconds. Use them. Look at the firm's hiring and attrition trends. What is the demographic makeup? By researching the firms, practice groups, and leadership, you will have more insightful information to provide to your candidate regarding the firm's DEI progress.

## **"No Need" – How to move beyond or at least unpack**

Now that you have thoroughly interviewed your candidate and researched and identified the right firms, you are eager to begin the process of introducing your candidate. You send your inquiry out and are quickly met with a "thank you - sorry, no need" email response from a law firm. What does this mean, really?

Law firm recruiters are busy – many of you (including yours truly) know this firsthand as you have made the switch from inside to outside search firm recruiting. The law firm recruiter may have briefly glanced at your blind inquiry or submission. They are looking for something specific your candidate lacks on paper. While diversity may be important in their recruiting efforts, it just is not a match on paper for this particular candidate.

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What do you do? Pick up the phone and politely press to learn more, especially if there is an existing relationship with the recruiting professional at the firm. Find out where the firm can be flexible in their hiring criteria or, if the criteria is rigid, ask what they need so you can get past the "no need" next time. Explain your candidate's drivers in making the move, why it makes sense for the firm to speak with them, and provide important background and context.

We are the storytellers bringing candidates to life. Paper submissions and email communications alone are not enough. Use this conversation with the law firm recruiter to discuss how this particular "non-traditional" candidate presents an *opportunity* for the firm and not a risk; challenge the bias that "traditional" candidates are often viewed as investment hires (when they do not have a book of business) and "non-traditional" candidates can be viewed as risky hires (when they also do not have a book of business). Use this conversation to revisit and unpack this institutionalized gatekeeping that can sideline "non-traditional" candidates.

## **Practice relationship-based recruiting**

Great things can happen for diverse candidates when search firm recruiters strategically partner with law firm recruiters. We are not in a transactional business. We are in the business of people and relationships. Recruiting in a transactional way causes us to lose the essence of what we are all here to do, and that is to invest in people. You cannot see the whole person if you only see one dimension of a person.

Relationship-based recruiting is about the long game and prevails over transactional recruiting. Recall the best recruiting relationship you have and ask yourself why that is the case. It is likely because you have taken the time to build on that relationship – one where there is a strong and open line of communication. We can partner with law firm recruiting professionals to be more involved and influential in hiring decisions to make DEI progress.

Through an engaged approach, we can have important conversations that can positively impact careers and change lives. To express that there is no need

for a diverse candidate when the data shows, year after year, that law firms lack diversity, requires conversation and explanation. In certain instances, it may make sense to involve a diversity professional at the firm to advance the conversation.

### ***Continuing engagement during the interview stage***

As your candidate advances to the interview stage, continue the dialogue with the law firm recruiter. Your knowledge and insight about your candidate and what is most important to them in this lateral move will help the law firm arrange a thoughtful interview experience. The interviews should include attorneys reflective of the firm's diversity, in addition to what the practice group needs for substantive vetting. Convey to the law firm what the candidate would like to have addressed to balance vetting with selling. Can the firm identify champions and sponsors for candidates to include? Who else at the firm had a similar path to this candidate? Are they successful? Can they be a sponsor? What progress have the firm's attorney leaders and recruiting professionals made in this area? What can other firms do to learn from these firms?

The firms doing the above are doing it well. They are open to con-

versations with search firm recruiters and will say, "I like what you are doing here and thank you for bringing us diverse candidates. Let's keep at this and hopefully next time it is a match."

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