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# Colonising London

**The US law firms  
that are conquering  
the London legal market**

## **Catalyst for change**

Why transformative BPI relies  
on people, not technology

## **Streamlined services**

How US law firms are falling  
behind in client management

## **David Morley**

‘Seven things I wish I knew  
before becoming senior partner’



**JULIOUS P. SMITH JR, CHAIR EMERITUS, WILLIAMS MULLEN**

# Five ways that law firms can make recruitment more of a science than an art

Over the summer, many professional sports teams added new faces to their rosters. They spent several months testing the physical and mental attributes of prospects. However, a large percentage of draftees will still end up on benches and in broadcast booths. Why? Because pro teams treat adding players as a science: they follow their process with little regard for the art of hiring. The unknown often trips them up.

On the other hand, law firms treat recruitment as an art. Most firms have no process to follow. They tend to invest their dollars not in due diligence, but in signing who they hope will be the next superstar. That decision usually turns on the recruit's stated book of business.

Even firms with recruiting departments generally use their personnel only to arrange meetings and check references, if any. Firms know surprisingly little about a new hire. As a result, a large number of lateral hires end up leaving after a few years (or months), at great cost to the firm.

How can law firms get better results? There are five things firms can do to make recruitment more of a science than an art.

### 1. Background checks

A law firm is a special club. Firms need to know more about whom they invite to join. A lawyer leasing a cheap flat in a bad part of town would ask for a credit report on the prospective tenant. Yet, that simple piece of information rarely finds its way into the prospect's file. Nor do firms inquire about a lawyer's personal life or past.

These topics should not be taboo. At a minimum, in addition to a credit report, applicants should represent that they filed all tax returns through a certain year and are not party to any litigation.

### 2. Book of business verification

Lawyers, consciously or unconsciously, are great optimists, particularly about their

books of business. A question about the value of a lawyer's 'book' brings his optimism to a boil. Pinning down that number presents real challenges for the firm. Unfortunately, both the decision to hire and the starting salary usually turn on the number. So, it is important.

If ethically allowed, contact the named clients to ferret out their relationship with the prospect. Require the lawyer to make a written representation of the actual amount that each client generated over the past three years. Focus on the past six to nine months of receipts. Declining business often motivates a lawyer to change firms.

### 3. Monitor success rates

A good firm knows its good recruiters. Firms should keep track of the success and failure of hires by section and office. Knowing that success rate gives the firm insight into whose recommendation to follow and whose to scrutinise more closely. Keeping score also measures the effectiveness of the firm's recruiting department. A long string of lateral hire failures not only costs the firm, but damages morale. A low success rate should raise questions about the recruiting department.

One caveat: Keeping score at too precise a level can chill the recruiting process. Be sure that the firm does not put so much pressure on people to recruit successfully that they stop recruiting.

### 4. Use psychometric tests

The ability to test recruits usually presents itself more in the summer associate situation than in the lateral hire. Summer associates should always be given some type of personality test. Firms value their culture, so these tests give good insight into how the recruit will fit into that culture. No matter how smart a new associate, without the ability to get along with his peers, he will not succeed.

### 5. Engage the managing partner

Most firms schedule a cursory meeting between prospective recruits and the managing partner. In those meetings, the managing partner usually promotes the firm. He assumes that the firm conducted its due diligence and that his job is to close the deal.

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**“Lawyers are great optimists, particularly about their books of business”**

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However, these meetings need to encompass more than the reasons why a recruit should join the firm. A short interview should lead to a longer meeting that gives the managing partner the opportunity to talk in detail with the recruit. Law firms rarely make any investment greater than the hiring of a lateral partner. The managing partner needs to be comfortable with that decision. That only happens if he spends quality time with the recruit.

### Balancing act

In summary, good recruiting falls somewhere between a science and an art. Successful recruiters apply a process that makes recruitment almost a science, but they don't neglect the human element of the art form. Firms also need a process that they can apply to every recruitment opportunity. The better and more consistent the process, the closer the firm gets to making recruitment a science.

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