Making Callbacks Memorable . . .

by Cherie Conrad

With callback season nearly upon us, Gina Sauer and Cherie Conrad agreed to revisit the topic of their popular 2003 Annual Education Conference program entitled "Callback Interviews — Make Them Memorable." In the article that follows, Cherie Conrad offers advice from her law firm perspective, while Gina Sauer adds insights based on what law students say impresses them most during callbacks.

From the Employer's Perspective

Making a callback memorable from the employer's perspective means ensuring that a callback results in successful two-way sharing of information. The employer is able to learn enough about the candidate to assess whether or not the candidate is the right "fit" for the organization and, at the same time, the candidate leaves the employer's office armed with sufficient information to make an informed decision about his or her prospects at that organization.

Who should represent your organization?

Students have said that the callback interview is a critical deciding factor that affects job choices. If a student feels that he or she has connected with the interviewers during a callback interview, then the student is more likely to accept an offer at that firm. Conversely, if a student has a bad experience with even one attorney during a callback interview, then he or she is less likely to accept a job offer.

Organizations should seek callback interviewers who demonstrate desired qualities — for example, interviewers who are knowledgeable about the organization; possess good judgment; have strong communication skills; and can market the

organization to a broad range of constituents. One way to ensure that all attorneys possess these skills is to host an interviewer training seminar at your organization prior to the commencement of the on-campus interviewing season. In fact, some organizations stipulate that attendance at such seminars is mandatory in order for any attorney to participate in the interview process.

There are several types of potential training courses. One is the interviewer training class, which is designed to educate your attorneys about the "nuts and bolts" of the interview process. Another is a seminar from the perspective of a labor attorney, designed to provide an in-depth look at employment laws that impact the recruiting process — from sexual harassment to inappropriate interview questions and comments; there is much to be learned in these areas, and annual or biannual sessions serve as an ideal way to protect your organization from inappropriate conduct down the road. Programs can be designed to be taught in-house, thus utilizing resources within your organization, or by a consultant who can interview your attorneys and summer associates and gain a true understanding of the culture of your organization. Most consultants are willing to work closely with your organization in order to design a custom program that meets your needs.

How to present your organization

After determining who should represent your organization, the next step is to define how you should present it. There is no magic formula that tells you how many interviewers should be involved in a callback interview in order to make a qualified decision on a student's candidacy. Depending on the size and composition of the organization, one employer may determine that five

or fewer interviewers is the appropriate number, while another may determine that seven to ten is more appropriate. The question to ask is what you hope to gain during each 20- to 30-minute segment. Are you already sure that every OCI candidate meets the "fit" requirement, and is each interview therefore designed to "sell" a candidate on your organization? Or, are there questions that your organization needs to have answered before a decision can be made?

A potential hazard of a multitude of "sell" interviews is that the candidate is frequently asked the same question time and time again throughout the callback experience. One way to maximize the "quality" of each 20- to 30-minute interview is to create categories or topics that an interviewer is tasked to cover during an interview slot. Categories may include some or all of the following.

- 1. **Organization** discussion of the organization in general. The history of the organization and what distinguishes the organization from others in the marketplace.
- Practice areas discussion of the various practice areas within an organization including a conversation about how a particular candidate may succeed in a particular practice area.
- 3. **Professional development** discussion of professional development opportunities within an organization.
- 4. **Analytical skills** an interview which includes an in-depth discussion designed to test a candidate's ability to "think on his or her feet."
- 5. **Clients** a conversation about the organization's clients and a discussion of any high-profile cases or deals that are currently being handled by the organization.
- 6. **Pro bono** a discussion about pro bono opportunities within an organization.
- 7. **Summer program** a discussion about the summer program in general, providing the

- candidate with an opportunity to ask specific questions.
- 8. **A sell** a conversation designed to convince the candidate of why an organization is the best "fit" for him or her.

Interview slots that focus on a specific category for each interviewer to cover help to ensure that the organization is gathering new and critical information about the candidate during every interview segment. At the same time, the organization is providing a structure that can highlight all of its strengths to each candidate. Regardless of your approach, the critical formula is to include attorneys who know what they are talking about and understand what their goal is during those 30 critical minutes.

Communication with students

You've survived the callback process and made your decisions on offers, and now it's time to communicate with the students. Timing is critical, especially in a tight economy when jobs are scarce. Students are anxious and sometimes accept offers before they have completed all of their callback interviews. As a general rule, employers should make it a priority to make decisions in a timely manner. At minimum, candidates should be told during the callback day when they are likely to hear from the organization. This communication goes a long way in easing anxiety and fostering the good impression that was made during the callback.

Callbacks require employers to be prepared to assess candidates while, at the same time, doing their best to ensure that candidates have positive callback experiences.

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Insights from the Law School Perspective

by Gina Sauer

Once the dust of OCI has settled, we at William Mitchell survey our students to learn what employer practices impressed and influenced them, and we share that information with local employers via an interview training workshop. Students have told us that the callback interview is perhaps the single most crucial point in the recruitment process — with the largest group of respondents (44%) identifying the callback as the point at which they focused on their ultimate employer choice. Their responses also demonstrate that Cherie Conrad's advice in the first part of this article is right on point.

Handpick your interviewers

Our survey has consistently shown that the individual interviewer becomes the face of the firm to the candidate and that the interviewer's personality and enthusiasm influence candidates more than any other single factor in the recruitment process. Students gave on-campus interviewers a 7.11 out of a possible 10 with respect to their level of influence over the candidate's choice of firm, while callback interviewers scored a whopping 9.33 out of 10! Make sure everyone on the callback roster truly wants to serve as an interviewer and understands how crucial their role is.

Arm them with information

Blame it on MTV and the Internet, but this generation of candidates wants a wealth of information, and they want it now. When we ask students to elaborate on why they didn't accept a particular offer, the reason is typically not based on any *negative* information they learned. Rather, they're more likely to tell us, "That firm didn't give me *enough* information to go on."

Candidates expect interviewers to be well versed in:

- The firm's practice areas.
- High-profile cases, clients, and firm news.
- · Hiring policies.
- Salaries, billable hour requirements, and average hours worked.
- Pro bono policies.
- The firm's mission statement.
- Specfics of the firm's summer program.

Obviously, not every attorney can be expected to know all of that, especially if your callback roster includes attorneys who aren't on the hiring committee or aren't typically involved in interviewing. In addition to the training Cherie suggests, give your interviewers a "cheat sheet" with the above information. Make sure the recruiting section of your web site includes the same information, along with up-to-date bios of your attorneys.

Culture is key

As the OCI process progresses, candidates shift their focus, and factors that were important at one point give way to others. When asked what factors influenced them to apply to a firm, the top answers were: specific practice areas (42%), prestige/ firm reputation (37%), firm culture (16%), and salary (5%). When asked what factors influenced them to *accept* an offer, however, firm culture won by a landslide (73%), followed by specific practice areas (27%). Prestige and salary dropped out of the picture entirely. The message? Callbacks should be carefully crafted to create a lasting impression of the intangibles that make your firm unique.

Personalize the interview

This generation of candidates seeks assurance that they won't fall through the cracks or become one of the rank and file; fulfilling their need for personal attention begins in the interview. When we asked our students what they found most effective in an interview, the most common responses reflected interviewers who asked questions specific to the candidate — exploring items on a résumé or following up on something the candidate shared rather than reciting a litany of canned questions. Not surprisingly, on the flip side the most commonly cited ineffective practices included interviewers who were "inattentive" or who obviously hadn't looked at the résumé prior to the interview. Several respondents summed it up by saying, "I never got to tell the interviewer about myself."

No need to rush

There has been a marked trend in the past couple of years for firms to extend offers more and more quickly following the callback; some interviewers are even authorized to extend offers on the day of the callback. As Cherie advises, firms shouldn't drag their feet and should keep students advised regarding anticipated timing of offers. However, our survey showed that the early bird doesn't necessarily get the worm. The vast majority of students (82%) said they held out and waited for the offer they really wanted — and would have waited even longer rather than accepting an earlier but less desirable offer. The more memorable the callback, the more likely the candidate will be to hold out for that offer letter or phone call from you!

If you are interested in the full survey results, please contact me at gsauer@wmitchell.edu.

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