

How General Counsels Can Improve Legal Hiring Decisions by Using the Big Five Personality Factors

The Big Five Personality Factors are a well-researched and effective framework to examine normal personality functioning. The core Big Five factors are:

- Introversion (high to low)
- Openness to New Experiences (high to low)
- Agreeableness (high to low)
- Neuroticism-Creativity (high to low)
- Conscientiousness (high to low)

In this article, we will focus on how hiring authorities can use the Big Five Personality Factors as a framework for hiring.

Openness to New Ideas

Of course, Conscientiousness as THE most important personality factor to consider when making hiring decisions in law.

It is rare to find an experienced GC who cannot come up with at least one horror story involving hiring a candidate with excellent academic credentials, great job interview skills, and low conscientiousness.

Why does this happen?

Employers assume that the U.S. education system weeds out students who are low on conscientiousness.

That assumption may not be valid. You can be highly intelligent from an IQ perspective yet low on

conscientiousness. There are pressures on professors to pass students and pressures on administrators to reduce student drop-out rate.

In this article we want to focus on what we consider to be the second most important Big Five personality trait when GCs hire legal staff: Openness to New Ideas.

Use LinkedIn Before the Candidate Meeting.

Before meeting a candidate for the first time, is it possible to speak with people you know who might know the person? LinkedIn is an excellent resource for identifying such people.

Below is a suggested question:

“On a scale of 0 (never) to 10 (always), give me a number that reflects how open this person is to new ideas?”

Once a number is given, ask the person to explain why that number was assigned.

Before meeting the candidate, do a Google search to find out if the candidate writes blogs. Do the topics focus on expansion, growth, and new ideas? That suggests high openness to new ideas.

Perhaps the blogs focus on reduction of risk/uncertainty. That might suggest low openness to new ideas.

Structuring the Employment Interview

The following interview questions will help confirm a candidate's openness to new ideas:

“Tell me a story about a time when you questioned the commonly accepted wisdom at your company or team?”

Since we are dealing with personality factors, it is acceptable if the person does not use a business example. Stories about sports or family are fine.

Candidates high on openness to new ideas will resonate when your interview resonates with words like “growth,” “innovation,” “new,” and “exciting.”

Suppose You Want Low Openness to New Ideas

A general company culture may be one of growth and transformation, yet you may still seek to hire legal professionals who are relatively closed to new ideas.

These are people who resonate with words like “consistency,” “reliability,” and “predictability:”

Compliance Officer within a hedge fund

Completion of SEC regulatory filings.

Patent applications.

Below is a question you might ask during the employment interview:

“Tell me a story about a situation that began in chaos, but you helped it become orderly.”

They will resonate to words like “stabilize,” “control,” “predict,” “measure,” “consistency.”

If your candidate is relatively closed to new ideas and you are relatively open to new ideas, there is going to be a conflict. Focus more on the requirements of the job. Make personality compatibility a secondary consideration.

Another option for GCs who score high on openness to new ideas: surround your legal team with people who also are open to new ideas. Outsource the more compliance-oriented issues to attorneys who love to wade into the administrative details.

GCs should consider the “Brand” that the GC has with the CEO. If the CEO considers the GC “Dr. No” and considers the legal department as the place where “good idea go to die,” then it might be prudent for the GC to surround herself with attorneys

high on openness to new ideas.

Summary and Conclusions

The Big Five Personality Factor framework as a well-researched framework to look at personality factors of high functioning “normal” adults.

General Counsels make a mistake in placing too much emphasis on hiring people with certain academic credentials or years of relevant industry experience. This emphasis often comes at the expense of not paying enough attention on personality/culture fit.

In ninety days most lawyers will learn enough about your industry to do the job at a fully competent level.

Skills can be learned.

It is far more effective to hire the right personality type at the front end than to hire the wrong personality type and spend time/money trying to change it.

References

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