

A close-up photograph of a person in a dark suit and light blue shirt, holding a black pen over a white document. The person's hands are the central focus, with the pen held between the fingers. The background is slightly blurred, showing the person's torso and the document they are writing on.

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*8 Ways*

To Effectively Evaluate Legal  
& Compliance Candidates

Any experienced recruiter is accustomed to scanning hundreds of resumes and swiftly eliminating those that don't meet expectations.

*The greater challenge is selecting the best among dozens of candidates who all appear equally qualified, at least initially.*

This is particularly true when hiring legal or compliance officers. **Most professionals at this level have polished resumes and are skilled at selling themselves, so candidate assessment is far more than a process of elimination.** It involves knowing what specific questions to ask, understanding how to ask them and how to interpret the responses.

**Recruiters must scrutinize all factors, including subtle indications of tone and body language.**

*Here's what all recruiters need to know about effectively evaluating candidates.*

## Consider cultural and professional presentation.

**Trust your gut when it comes to first impressions.** If your first contact is through a written correspondence, what is the quality of the written documents? Any typos, poor grammar or formatting errors are unacceptable for anyone applying to fill such a significant role. Likewise, consider the candidate's responsiveness to your phone call and the quality of the conversation. Does the candidate's voice project confidence or hesitation? Is the email communication clean and professional?

Be aware of other signs that reveal the level of interest and personality traits of the candidate. Many times at the General Counsel or CCO level, interviews need to be postponed or re-scheduled due to conflicts with the executive team. How does the candidate respond to the changes or delays in the process? Early signs of frustration, a lack of patience or cooperation reveal a candidate's character.

If you meet with the candidate in person, pay close attention to their demeanor and style. Does it fit into your company culture? Some companies thrive with an informal, casual demeanor, while others require a more business formal personal presentation. In some cases, it's possible to be overdressed.

Another key indicator is the candidate's comfort level with the interview process. Since counsel and compliance opportunities come with stress, you want to hire someone who is not easily shaken by the stress of the interview process.



*The No. 1 knock-out factor for an attorney interviewing for a position is appearing nervous in an interview. These lawyers are going to be in stressful situations where there are high stakes involved. If they can't come to an interview and be comfortable, they're not going to be a good fit.*

*- BarkerGilmore Managing Partner John Gilmore*

## Assess motivation.

**Here's a loaded question: "Why are you interested in this opportunity?"**

An astute candidate's answer will include the reasons why your company and the particular opportunity are of interest. A lower performing candidate will discuss why he or she is interested in leaving the current position. Understanding the candidate's true motivation up front can be valuable when it comes time to close on an offer. It's also a valuable resource when discussing a potential counter offer with your finalist. While his or her current company might be able to increase compensation as a means of retaining the employee, it does not fix many of the candidate's initial reasons for looking into the position in the first place.

**As you examine motivations, it's important to gauge a candidate's sincerity.**

Candidates at this level will be well-versed in interviewing, so you'll need to look beyond rehearsed answers.

BarkerGilmore Managing Director Destree Rickard said one tactic for gauging sincerity is to ask multiple variations of the same question.

"It's all in the level of detail in the answer," she said. "There's a fine balance between not enough detail, which means they weren't very involved or they're giving you a canned story, and too much detail, which could indicate they're fabricating a story."

## Outline the process.

**Use a candidate's resume as a guide throughout the process, not just as a means of selecting the candidate from the stack.** A more extensive review of the resume will give you an understanding of each career move and insight into the candidate's motives.

Pay close attention to any gaps. If the candidate was without a job for any length of time, you need to determine what happened and how the candidate responded. Many highly talented attorneys found themselves out of a job when firms dissolved and companies downsized during the height of the recession.

Also be mindful of the frequency of job changes and the motives behind them. If the candidate moved because of a promotion, that's a positive change. Moving because the leader of a law firm moved to another firm and recruited your candidate to follow is a positive change. Lateral moves for no apparent reason should be cause for concern.

When asking the candidate about accomplishments listed, pay close attention to how he or she describes them. A candidate who frequently talks about what "we" accomplished may not have been as involved as he would like you to believe. Be aware, though, that many highly effective leaders are more likely to use "we" as they move up the ranks within a company. In general, women are also more likely than men to use language that indicates collaboration. Ask follow-up questions to clarify the candidate's specific role in the project.

**Finally, look for indications of the candidate going beyond the job responsibilities. This could include taking on leadership roles in various industry associations or pro-bono work that broadened the candidate's expertise.**

## Use behavioral-based interviewing.

Past performance is indicative of future behavior. A thorough behavioral assessment reveals important traits about a candidate's character based on previous behaviors.

Prepare a series of behavioral questions that align well with the culture of your organization and the parameters of your position.

**Here are some examples of specific character traits and the questions that reveal them.**

**Integrity** - Describe a situation or two in which the pressure to compromise your integrity was the strongest you have ever felt.

**Strategic Problem Solving** - Tell me about a time when you had a complex problem to solve. What options did you generate? How did you choose the best one?

**Resourcefulness** - What sorts of obstacles have you faced in your present / most recent job, and what did you do? (Look for passion and effectiveness in figuring how to surmount barriers to success.)

**Organization / Planning** - Give me an example of a time when the details of a task or project were particularly important. How did you ensure accuracy on a consistent basis?

**Adaptability** - Tell me about a time where you reacted quickly to changing conditions.

Competency questions need to be customized for the unique skill set required for the position, the industry the company operates within, the circumstances surrounding the need for a new executive and the business goals and objectives of the executive team.

For example, if a new General Counsel is a replacement due to a regulatory issue that the company faces, the new General Counsel must have the specific regulatory experience necessary to satisfy the regulators. If General Counsel is being hired to take a company public and grow the business, a background focused in securities law and M&A is more appropriate.

### Questions to Ask General Counsel

*What core practice areas are you most comfortable with?*

*How have you been able to help the company achieve business objectives?*

*What types of matters require you to seek outside counsel?*

*What tools or resources have you integrated into the law department?*

*Discuss the most complex legal issues you have faced. What was your strategy for solving the problems and what was the outcome?*

*What has your interaction been with various regulators?*

*What is your current operating budget for the law department?*

*What is your risk tolerance? Have you made a legal decision you have come to regret?*

*How have you helped to control costs or reduce outside spending in the law department?*

*Why do you feel you are the right person to be General Counsel of this company?*

*Would business leaders say you enable or prevent business?*

### Questions to Ask Compliance Officers

*Tell me about the last compliance program you successfully directed.*

*Describe an effective method you have used to assess and manage possible compliance risks.*

*What were the key initiatives of the program?*

*Describe a method you have used to ensure monitoring and testing procedures meet the goals of a compliance program.*

*What was the biggest challenge?*

*What methods helped you be successful?*

*Share an experience in which you accurately predicted the compliance impact of an industry change.*

*How many employees did the program impact?*

*What methods help you stay informed on these changes?*

*Tell me about a specific compliance plan you developed or implemented for a program.*

*Share an experience in which you improved the communication, monitoring or enforcement of compliance standards. What methods led to a successful improvement?*

*How did you generate buy-in at all levels?*

*What changes needed to be made?*

*How did you ensure the program was working?*



## Assess for Leadership

Begin by understanding the current reporting structure of the candidate as well as the structure and size of the organization under the candidate.

### **The following questions will reveal many of the leadership qualities of the individual**

*What did your organization look like when you began in the position and how has it evolved under your direction?*

*What is the percentage of A, B and C players on your team?*

*Tell me about an employee you developed into an A player, who was not one when you started.*

*How do you deal with underperforming employees?*

*How do you motivate others?*

*What metrics do you use to determine the performance of your organization and how do you measure the performance of your employees?*

*What are the most important values you demonstrate as a leader? Tell me a story that demonstrates these leadership values in practice within the workplace.*



## Assess Compensation Expectations.

Many times a company will take a candidate through the entire interview process without discussing compensation. This can lead to disappointment and frustration for both parties. The best way to deal with compensation is to be direct.

First, understand the candidate's current base salary, short-term bonus structure and long term incentive. Know when the next salary review will be made and when bonuses will be paid. What is the unvested long term incentive the candidate would be walking away from? If the first year bonus at your company is pro-rated, the candidate will most likely be walking away from a cash bonus from his or her current employer. If this presents a problem, consider a sign-on bonus.

## Assess References.

Gaining insight from others is a crucial part of evaluating any candidate. First, find out how the candidate believes others think of him or her.

### **Here's a powerful question:**

*"If you were to arrange confidential reference calls with your management and some of your major clients, what would they say are your greatest strengths and areas for improvement?"*

The next step is to have conversations with the references and compare how their comments match up with those of the candidate.

The ability for a person to provide a number of high-level, quality references is typically an indicator of a top performer. People who stumble when asked this question typically have not impressed the people they have worked with in the past and are reluctant to provide high-level management references from previous employers.

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## The Bottom Line

Assessing legal and compliance candidates is a rigorous process that takes time. Too often, companies find themselves with an immediate need to fill and rush through candidate assessment, skipping crucial steps.

Having an unfilled position costs your company productivity and the assurance of risk management, but hiring the wrong candidate is even more costly. Someone who lacks the competence to effectively manage regulatory matters can lead to serious fines and missteps that erode public trust.

An executive recruiting firm with legal and compliance expertise can take your company through the entire assessment process, reducing the time constraints for you and assuring a quality hire.



*BarkerGilmore uses rigorous assessment techniques as part of its customized hiring process. We have the skills and industry expertise to identify the best fit, and we guarantee our results.*

To learn more about how we evaluate candidates,

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