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Within any given legal field, there are probably hundreds of attorneys to choose from, especially for common areas of law like divorce, car accidents and criminal defense. How do you find the one that's best for you? Always interview a lawyer before hiring her to represent you.

When I say interview her, I mean really interview her. Remember you are the client. You should be creating a partnership with the attorney, but as a client you should expect and demand good service.

Here are some helpful hints for hiring and working with a lawyer:

1. Ask about cost and always get the lawyer's fees in writing! I cannot tell you the number of people who come to me after firing their previous attorney because they believe that they were over-billed. They complain about \$25.00 phone calls, \$100.00 copying fees, etc... It's important to know up front how much you will be charged, and whether you will be paying your attorney hourly or on a contingency basis. Ask about court fees, administrative costs and other expenses of your case. If you are getting charged by the hour I suggest you insist on monthly, itemized billing statements. Don't be afraid to ask for an example of what a bill will look like. Too many attorneys use generic time entries instead of really documenting what they are doing.

2. Inquire about the attorney's plan for your case! Before you hire a lawyer you get to talk about your situation and why you came to her. Wouldn't it be nice to know what they are going to do for you? While an attorney will not be able to predict the outcome of your case, she should be able to give you an outline of what to expect. Ask what documents she plans to prepare, or what type of lawsuit she plans to file. Find out how long she expects each stage of your case to last and who you will be working with along the way. An attorney who has experience with your type of case will be able to answer these questions. Also, arrive prepared at the initial consultation. Bring any papers you think the attorney may need when working on your case and prepare a list of questions to ask the lawyer.

3. Ask the attorney if she handles your type of case often. Whether it's a slip and fall lawsuit, or a workers' compensation dispute or a DUI, you'll want someone who can hit the ground running. Ask how many cases like yours the attorney has taken in the past, and what percentage of her practice is focused on your particular area of law. For most types of cases, if the attorney doesn't spend at least 50% of her time on what you are dealing with, keep looking. It is impossible to be a jack-of-all-trades in the legal profession. Sometimes I use testimonials or references from former clients (with their consent of course) as a means of demonstrating my professional experience and personal work-ethic to potential clients.

4. Ask the attorney how she will communicate with you. I know that this sounds like a

silly question, but many of my clients complain that their former attorneys never returned phone calls or visited them while incarcerated. Find out how your lawyer will contact you, and how often she will update you on your case. Ask how quickly phone calls are returned and who returns them. Is it the attorney or a secretary? In my practice, I make it a point to return all phone calls personally. My belief is that when a client leaves a message for me, he wants to speak with me – not an assistant. Find out if e-mail is a proper means of communication. Sometimes it is easier for attorney to communicate via email than the telephone. In general, it's reasonable to expect a response within 24 hours. If you leave multiple messages without a call back you probably hired the wrong lawyer.

5. What if a dispute arises during the course of representation? In the event that a dispute arises between you and your attorney, most state bars offer dispute resolution services. These services can be of particular benefit in the event of fee disputes. If you feel that your attorney has acted in an unethical manner, each state has a "grievance" procedure where you can file a complaint against your attorney and have your complaint investigated.

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