Buzzer Beaters & Bracket Busters: What March Madness Teaches Us About Selecting Talent at Law Firms

By LawVision on March 25, 2014

March Madness is here and brackets across the country have already started to crumble. As most of us know, in addition to office bragging rights, this year picking a perfect bracket could even win you a billion dollars, thanks to Warren Buffett. As I made my basketball picks this year I realized that some of the familiar "criteria" for choosing teams during March Madness are not too dissimilar from methods law firms use to select talent, often with the same unpredictable results. Here are five examples:

Highest Seed. Lawyers like logic and predictability. Understandably, it makes sense that a first seed would knock off a sixteenth seed, and so it also goes with law school rankings. Why recruit an associate from a third tier law school when the firm historically hires only top ten graduates, you ask? Every now and then a Cinderella team emerges. Is your firm positioned to take the chance?

School Favoritism. Unfortunately, Vanderbilt gave me no hopes of an exciting run this year. But if they had, I may have admittedly shown a selection bias toward my beloved Commodores. If my team prevails, I feel like even more of a winner! Such favoritism is inherent both in basketball as well as law firm recruiting, but showing bias for the familiar may prevent us from identifying the stronger contender.

Mascot. Personally, this is my favorite way of picking tournament teams. When it comes to selecting lateral talent, we tend to make similar choices. If a candidate from "Big name AmLaw 20 firm" is paired against "Small local solo practitioner", some firms assume that the former can easily out-power the latter in terms of experience, training and client exposure. Jumping to that conclusion without vetting both candidates may be a costly mistake.

Test Scores. Some lawyers I know choose their brackets based upon schools' average SAT scores. Likewise, some lawyers I know choose applicants to interview for summer associate programs based upon LSAT scores. Although LSAT scores may be predictive of law school grades, the overall predictive ability of either method seems tenuous at best

The Dark Horse. Some brave souls picked dark horses in their college basketball brackets early on. Interestingly, more and more law firms are also thinking outside of mainstream talent models. Cutting edge firms are actually reevaluating whether adding new lawyers is the right fit for their talent needs at all, opting instead for individuals with sales, business development, operations or executive administration skills to advance their organizations.

Although March Madness is exciting, truth be told it will also wreak temporary havoc on productivity. With an estimated 50 million Americans participating in March Madness office pools, companies stand to lose at least $1.2 billion for every unproductive work hour during the first week of the tournament, according to calculations by Chicago-based outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc. We can only extrapolate the same effect on law firms across the country. Perhaps the silver lining is that while watching our brackets crumble we will start to be more introspective about the processes we use to make our selections- both on the hardwood and within our law firm walls.