

When Hiring A Lawyer ...

Fraud. Breach of contract. Employment problems. Business Disputes. Settling a disagreement or pursuing or defending yourself in a civil action.

The reasons to hire an attorney vary greatly. But the key factors you should consider before retaining counsel are almost always the same.

Here are some basic guidelines for choosing a legal advisor, as well as several recommended steps to help you get off to a good start with your new lawyer.

1. **Expertise.** It's important to hire an attorney with experience handling legal issues like yours. Most attorneys have one or more specialties. You're likely to get the best advice from an expert. A specialist who understands the applicable law in your case or matter can also work more quickly. You wouldn't go to a heart doctor for a skin ailment, would you? In the same way, you shouldn't hire a domestic relations attorney for a business dispute.
2. **Value.** Experienced lawyers can generally charge more for their services. However, this cost is often offset, because you don't have to pay a skilled attorney for the time it would take to learn the applicable laws. To increase your chances of success, you may want to spend the extra money to hire someone with the necessary knowledge and skills. In short, the cheapest option is not always the best.
3. **Compatibility.** Be sure you're comfortable with your attorney, both personally and professionally. Don't hire legal counsel until you've met and discussed your case. That's the best way to gauge how well you'll likely work together. Be sure the lawyer communicates well and answers your questions. Make sure you understand the communications process, too; ask how you'll be informed about the status of your case; how you'll contact the lawyer, and how long it will take the lawyer to return calls or correspondence.
4. **Organization.** Get all documents related to your legal situation, and create a timeline or history of the facts. When you meet with an attorney, share any written material, such as contracts, bills, checks, receipts, and statements. Provide a list of the names, addresses and phone numbers of all persons involved. That way, your lawyer can advise you properly and quickly.
5. **Preparation.** Be ready to discuss your case with the lawyer. To provide quality legal advice, your attorney needs to thoroughly understand the facts regarding your matter. Be truthful, and don't withhold any related information, even if it's negative. Remember, the attorney is legally bound to keep your discussion confidential. Also, be clear about your goals and expectations.

6. **Listening.** Feel free to take careful notes when the attorney talks with you about your case. Also, you want an advisor who'll be candid. The lawyer's job is to tell you what you need to know, not to be your best friend. Be wary of an attorney who "guarantees" results. No lawyer can be expected to win every case, and sometimes the best legal advice may not be what you want to hear.
7. **Fees.** Make sure you understand the financial terms up front. At your first meeting with the attorney, thoroughly discuss the fee structure. Generally, lawyers use three types of fee arrangements:
 - Hourly (for business and general civil litigation)
 - Fixed (usually for simple matters such as wills)
 - Contingency (for personal injury cases)

The lawyer should provide you with a written fee agreement stating your rights and obligations, as well as the lawyer's. Never use an attorney who won't give you a written fee agreement.

Finally, it's always a good idea to consult with your state bar to verify the attorney is in good standing, and has not been disciplined for any ethical violations.