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Ten Top Strategies for Retaining Tomorrow's Talent

by

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Ten Top Strategies for Retaining Tomorrow's Talent

By Dr. Sharon Meit Abrahams

In my 20 plus years working with lawyers I have learned that all lawyers want to be wanted and valued by their firms. According to the famous psychologist, Abraham Maslow, everyone needs to understand how they fit in and have a sense of belonging. It has become apparent that tomorrow's legal talent requires even more hand-holding than previous generations because the "just do it" attitude, does not work. They want to understand why and what's the payoff of their efforts. By creating a firm culture that addresses these concerns you will heighten your firm's ability to retain precious talent. The following are ten strategies your firm can implement.

Set Expectations

Be clear about expectations related to hours, face time and how it ties to compensation and promotion. Many firms have a "black box" around how they pay their attorneys, not just partners. If you are a production focused firm then clearly state what the requirements are for minimum hours and what constitutes enough hours to hit bonus levels. If your firm is more ambiguous and you take into consideration non-billable work then create a framework that will spell it out clearly. The younger generation wants to know the rules. They want it in "black and white", to quote one associate committee member I worked with at a firm.

Provide Opportunities

A recent analysis into employment trajectory uncovered that younger people are interested in moving around to acquire skills and experience rather than moving up in the same firm. Through exit interviews I conduct I often hear that after two or three years attorneys are willing to move to another firm to work with clients in a different industry or practice a different type of law altogether. Offering new work experiences within your firm allows them to develop new skills and have different work experiences so they do not have to seek them elsewhere.

Offer Challenging Work

Most lawyers like what they do and they want to continue to grow in their knowledge of the law. The youngest attorneys are no longer satisfied with document reviews for the first three years of their practice. They, like their peers in the corporate world, feel they do not have to "pay their dues" to get choice work. They want to have opportunities sooner rather than later. I recommend firms institute a work assignment system to ensure challenging assignments are distributed equitably and often.

Create Work/Life Balance

This is a tough one. Tomorrow's talent does not want to work like the senior partners: 12-hour days or 80-hour weeks. They want to be home with their families and go hiking on the weekends. I suggest that firms review what their tolerance level is for part time, flextime or remote working relationships. I have seen firms where the hours requirements continue to creep up leaving attorneys working harder than they signed up for when they joined. They become unhappy and eventually resign.

Mentor Them

Mentoring is a win-win-win situation. Regular mentoring leads the mentee to professional excellence and higher morale, which fuel higher job satisfaction and quality of work. The mentor wins by feeling a sense of pride when the mentee develops into a thriving, satisfied professional. Ultimately the firm wins when it is easier to recruit, develop and retain associates. When I hear "I had no champion, so I left," my first question is whether or not the firm had a mentoring program.

Sponsor Them

Sponsorship places greater expectations on both parties than mentorship and involves more action, trust and risk. Sponsorship focuses primarily on advancement, not on advice, guidance and information and sponsorship requires a track record of high performance and proven potential that make the sponsor see the protégée as worthy of sponsorship. For sponsors, it is an opportunity to "pay it forward" therefore, creating an individual sponsor plan is a critical first step.

Teach Management Skills

Being a good manager is not easy and there are poor role models lingering in the corners. It is important for a firm to implement a robust and targeted management series to address the variety of skills needed to excel. Programs can be technical like project management skills to softer skills, but equally as important, like emotional intelligence in the workplace. From my experience attorneys might scoff at the softer skills training, but after they attend they see the value in these topics.

Assign Leadership Tasks

Just like learning to dance, but never going dancing, all the programs and initiatives a firm implements go to waste if the attorney does not get a chance to apply what they have learned. Ask your high potential talent to take on projects that will improve a practice area or the firm as whole. These can range from planning a social event to overhauling a docketing process. The key is that the attorney will rely on a team or small committee and that's where the leadership and management skills kick in.

Recognize Contributions

Gallup, a workplace analytics firm, does research about employee satisfaction and they report that firms should recognize top performers because they need to know their efforts are valued. They also say that recognition needs to be tailored to the individual. I recommend that a firm determine what an individual will affirmatively respond to, for example lunch with a senior leader might be a highlight or just having their name mentioned at meeting could be satisfactory. For the attorney to feel valued it needs to be meaningful to them.

Clear a Path to Partnership

In the end not all your legal talent wants to be a partner, however, the odds go up when they see the path and know the rules to get them to the goal. When I work with attorneys on the cusp of partnership their biggest complaint is not knowing what the firm wants. Share the criteria used for promotion to partner and guide your top talent so they can see a future with your firm. This applies to those who have already made partner as well, if they do not see their future roadmap into leadership roles they will move on.

By communicating with your talent, providing the proper tools and giving opportunities to grow along the way you are more likely to retain your attorneys so they will become the next generation of partners and leaders at your firm.

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About the Author

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