



Best Practices in Leadership: Stop the Bleeding: How Leaders Can Improve Associate Retention*

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The Attrition Problem

Much has been written about the tremendous costs to law firms caused by associate attrition. Indeed, each year various organizations survey law firms and publish results that carefully detail attrition trends across geographic areas, gender lines and other population categories. For example, one recent study confirms that the overall attrition rate for fifth year associates is almost 60%. For fifth year minority women, that rate jumps to 74%, and after eight years 100% leave the firms they initially joined. Another study found that women attorneys account for over 43% of associates or staff/senior attorneys and yet only 16.81% of partners in law firms are women.

So what is it about law firm employment that turns off so many excellent lawyers? According to both the National Association for Law Placement and “The Lateral Lawyer: Why They Leave And What Will Make Them Stay,” some of the most important factors that compel associates to leave their firms are professional development and mentoring; practice areas; financial incentives; workplace environment and work/life balance. Most importantly, the study showed that professional development was the single most important factor to associates.

The Retention Solution

All of this suggests that savvy law firm leaders can do more than just raise salaries to stem the tide of attrition. Most importantly, leaders can ensure that their firms increase the amount and quality of their training programs. We know from recent data that, in fact, more firms have been doing just that. For example, a 2003 survey conducted by Yale Law School Women, the Yale Career Development Center, and NALP revealed that the majority of firms today are now offering such training. These leaders and their firms have come to understand that substantial training is necessary to keep top talent and to ensure that their attorneys are professionally and personally satisfied. Notably, emphasis on professional development not only aids in retention, but it also helps improve firm culture, client service, productivity, and loyalty.

The best professional development programs will include group training, individual coaching, and mentoring. It takes strong leadership to make a significant impact on lawyer retention, but it can be done. Below are some concrete tips for leading your firm’s efforts toward growing and retaining your top talent:

- ***Identifying practice area(s) of interest***
 - Help them decide what area of practice most interests or personally satisfies them. Have them consult with partners and senior associates and get advice, and when they reach a decision, get their commitment to mastering that area.
 - Help them determine whether their area of interest is one not yet served by your office and whether they could fill a need. Encourage buy-in and support from their partners to support development of skills in that area.

- ***Becoming an expert in a particular area***
 - Help them seek out and work with a partner in your firm who either practices in their area of interest or can guide them if this is a new area for the firm. Encourage them to be available to do the work and show dedication and enthusiasm for both the area of law and working with the partner.
 - Facilitate mentoring relationships with partners who can help their substantive and professional development.
 - Encourage them to become the very best lawyer they can be substantively, and become the “go-to” person in your office in their area of expertise.
 - Encourage involvement in public service cases to gain expertise and exposure in their desired area while enhancing their network and providing strong personal satisfaction. Note that sophisticated clients increasingly use the amount of pro bono work being done as a factor for hiring law firms.
 - Teach them to ask for work from a partner in (or out) of their area of interest so that their colleagues and firm clients will see their capabilities.

- ***Raising their profile***
 - Help them to become active leaders in bar association substantive law committees. The lawyers they meet can become a valuable resource for referrals.
 - Have them ask other lawyers for recommendations as to the best programs to attend and remind them that the firm supports attendance at CLE.
 - Encourage them to become a lecturer or faculty member on panels and seek out media opportunities.
 - Encourage them to write substantive law articles either under their name or co-author with a partner or another associate. Have them find partners who are scheduled to make a presentation and offer to assist.
 - Have them volunteer their skills/expertise to high profile civic and charitable organizations.
 - Support attendance at conferences and lunch meetings with targeted prospective clients and referral sources in order to maintain and build their networks.
 - Provide support for associates to demonstrate their expertise by making substantive internal presentations to your colleagues and external pitches to clients.

- ***Planning their career paths***
 - Encourage them to be patient. It takes a long time and extensive experience to become an “expert” in their substantive area of law and become widely known. Persistence and patience are not only required, but also ultimately rewarded.
 - Annually, with the help of their mentor or a chosen partner, have them write a specific development plan. It should delineate how their strengths will be used to maximum advantage during the year, as well as how they will improve their skills in areas they need to develop further.
 - Significant satisfaction comes from acquiring clients, so give them the tools and guidance to develop a career-long approach to building their practice. For example, they can learn the fundamentals of business development, be encouraged to expand and deepen relationships with people in their networks, and begin narrowing their focus in order to create a niche practice.
 - Recognize the human desire to find a balance between their personal and professional lives. Help them strike a balance by frequently reminding them to “be a person first and a lawyer second.”

Final Thoughts

Whether your associates are on a quest to develop their substantive skills, their rainmaking skills, their managerial and leadership skills, or all of the above, you can play an integral part in helping them see that staying at the firm is the right choice for them. Through your guidance, you can help them appreciate the many satisfactions of a life in the law. Under your management, you can ensure that they are given all of the tools

they need to become the best lawyers possible and to truly enjoy their careers. Finally, through your leadership, your firm will dramatically decrease attrition and increase the firm's overall success.

**This article was adapted from a speech by Michael Greco, President-Elect of the American Bar Association, given at the ABA Women in Law Leadership Conference in March 2004. The authors wish to thank Mr. Greco for his permission to share his insights with our readers.*