

The legal sector is bracing for a potential mass retirement of its mature workforce. For mid-sized law firms, this exodus could be particularly damaging if preparations to avoid a talent shortage aren't made now.

With heightened competition for talent, mid-tier law firms are beginning to overhaul their traditional recruiting and retention practices and ushering in new tactics, such as diversity plans, flexible scheduling and innovative benefits.

Mid-Sized Law Firm Recruiting and the Candidates Who (Could) Work There

The recruitment game has changed dramatically over the past decade. Not only have the recruitment tools changed, but the candidate pool and workforce needs and wants have changed as well.

Knowing that this is the case, companies in all industries must also shift how they seek and attract the most qualified candidates to fill open positions. These same issues and need for change are also prevalent and necessary in the legal sector.

An Industry of Mature Workers

The legal industry is facing a mature workforce crisis. Not unlike many other industries, law firms are organizations where experience and longevity matter to clients and business associates. So lawyers are often times able to extend their careers into their 60s, 70s and even 80s. However, this doesn't mean that retirement isn't going to happen, and for mid-sized law firms, mass retirement could be a more crucial problem than for their larger counterparts. The larger number of attorneys moving into retirement age means the possibility of a significant knowledge gap and a talent shortage that mid-tier law firms cannot afford.

Law firms, especially those considered mid-tier, need to prepare for a talent shortage now. What that means is assessing where improvements can be made to recruiting and retention practices, which may include a benefits overhaul, creating a diversity plan and instituting new workplace policies, such as flexible scheduling, that benefit both new recruits and existing workers.

Establish a Strong Recruiting Arm and Candidate Profile

Some mid-tier law firms do not have the luxury of retaining a large recruiting/human resources department. If this is the case, firms should consider assigning one attorney or a group of attorneys (three to four) to a recruitment committee, focused on the recruitment of candidates to your firm, and to partake in the interviewing and on-boarding processes.

When considering a recruitment committee, take into account the diversity of the firm - not only ethnic diversity, but age diversity as well. As you shore up your recruitment function, you should then establish a candidate profile of who would best fit into the law firm. A diverse committee will ensure that the candidate profile is one that offers a variety of points of view, not only based on talent and experience, but what type of candidate will be a personality and cultural fit.

Assess Benefits and Workplace Offerings

With today's workers, sought-after benefits packages go beyond vacation and health insurance plans. Although some studies still show that solid health care insurance is the single most important benefit for workers, many employees are also looking for such perks as elder care, working mother/child care and hiatuses for personal growth and development. Some mid-sized law firms do not have the ability to offer as high a base pay as larger firms, but many times benefits will make up for a lack in salary.



Furthermore, consider part-time or flexible scheduling options. This will help mature attorneys ease into retirement, without leaving their career and taking their knowledge and expertise with them. Entry level and early career can also take advantage of flexible or work-at-home options, to help them balance their personal and professional lives.

Career growth and employee feedback is essential for many employees. But for attorneys, a well-defined career path that is peppered with continuing education, mentoring and annual reviews that are consistent and helpful is a huge asset that many companies are lacking. Becoming partner is the ultimate goal, so establishing the steps and expectations of climbing the legal ladder is imperative, and should be added to the benefits package.

Diversity Best Practices

As employee demographics shift and change, so will the makeup of companies' workforces. The legal industry has made tremendous strides in creating diversity initiatives that foster the sourcing and hiring of diverse professionals. However, there is still work to be done.

According to the most recent National Association of Legal Professionals' (NALP) annual study, the *NALP Directory of Legal Employers*, women account for 45.06 percent of associates, minorities for 18.07 percent of associates, and minority women for 10.07 percent of associates.

To be considered an employer of choice in today's environment, companies must have a diverse workforce that goes well beyond the hiring of multi-cultural professionals. It means having an invested initiative dedicated to recruiting, hiring, supporting and promoting diversity inside and outside of the firm.

The NALP points out that diversity starts with a commitment from top leadership. If diversity is an area that is a top priority, but the firm does not know where to start, a consultant can help steer the firm in the right direction and at least create a plan of action that can be easily implemented.

Diversity training is a key element to creating a cohesive plan for recruitment and retention, and diverse employees should be part of the fabric of the firm from top to bottom. Supporting minority, women and multi-cultural education, career development and community causes will encourage an open dialogue about diversity and position the law firm as part of a diverse community invested in developing a relationship with potential candidates who are seeking employment with a diverse firm.

The internal work environment also counts when it comes to promoting multiculturalism and diversity in the workplace. Creating affinity groups and recognizing national ethnic and diversity celebrations, such as African-American History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month and GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender) History Month. These celebrations not only help create an understanding between workers, but promote open and honest conversations about our differences and similarities.

Finding the Candidates Who Will Find You

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the legal profession is expected to grow by 11 percent in the next eight years. Unlike many industries, the legal talent pool is a strong one, due to the large number of students who enter law school each year. As a result, law firms should have an easy time filling open positions, right? But the fact of the matter is that finding quality candidates and *appealing* to them as an employer may prove to be a challenging task.

As previously discussed, there are several areas where mid-tier law firms can improve their offerings to make their firm more attractive to top-tier, young lawyers. Assessing benefits, defining career paths and increasing diversity are just a few ways to make the firm attractive. But how will the candidates find your firm and recognize it as a potential employer?

Just like candidates in other industries, attorneys searching for a job are taking their search to the Web and ever further to social media sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook, as well as the blogosphere. Technology is a huge part in attracting and recruiting qualified candidates. Law firm Web sites, which have traditionally been thought of as sedate and dull, will now need to be thought of as crucial tools for recruiting.

Conclusion

Workplace dynamics are changing everyday, and the legal profession is changing with them. Recruiting the best and brightest young lawyers has always been a top priority for law firms of all sizes, but the demands of potential employees have changed and created more competition among firms. Today, law firms are finding that it's not good enough to just be the biggest or most well-known. Yes, the work they do and the clients they represent count, but what junior attorneys are looking for is a firm where they can grow their career, reap rewards and benefits for their work, and have a diverse working environment that fosters both personal and professional growth.