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8 Unique HR Challenges Firm Administrators Face and How They Can Solve Them

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Any human resource (HR), firm administrator, or back-office professional working within a law firm environment can affirm that firm culture creates its own set of distinct challenges. Regulatory guidelines and industry standards require considerations not often seen within other business industries. While most big law firms maintain an HR department to address these complexities, HR issues often wind up on a law firm administrator's long list of duties.

This blog will take a look at eight unique HR challenges commonly experienced by law firm administrators.



1. Finding the Best Legal Talent

Law firms constantly compete with one another to [attract new talent](#). With such a high level of competition, firms need financial incentives, like aggressive compensation packages and new hire bonuses, to stand out from the crowd. While administrators typically don't make compensation decisions, they do have significant influence to craft a workplace culture that attracts new talent. Legal professionals want to work in an environment where they feel heard and appreciated. By implementing policies that address this desire, law firm administrators can help their firms attract quality new hires.

In recent years, younger law school graduates have also voiced a preference to work with firms that have taken public stances on social issues and actively support initiatives that they find important. These candidates want to feel good about where they choose to work, and some of them are even willing to forgo larger salaries to meet this philosophical need.

Recognizing this growing trend, administrators can take steps to highlight their firm's philanthropic efforts during the recruitment stage. Whether it's pro bono representation or direct financial contributions, charitable information should be highlighted when recruiting.

2. Workplace Diversity

Over the past year, the lack of diversity within law offices has garnered a lot of attention, with increasing criticism about the industry's lack of racial, ethnic, and gender inclusion. Traditional recruitment efforts to find and secure new associates often create applicant pools that are far from diverse, so this is where firm administrators should start when seeking to address the issue.

For instance, administrators can suggest that firms expand their recruitment efforts to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and job fairs that focus on promoting diversity. By casting a wider net, firms can better position themselves for the consideration of a more diverse candidate pool.

Administrators can also take steps to revamp their firm's recruiting processes and minimize bias. Tools like blind recruiting and diverse hiring committees promote diversity and help law firms meet their goals.

In addition to finding the best diverse talent, law firms also need strategies to keep them. Sustained law firm diversity requires an environment where all attorneys feel welcomed and valued. Firm administrators can promote this culture with policies such as:

- Clear standards for the treatment of all employees
- The provision of diversity and inclusion training
- Mentoring opportunities for minority firm members
- The creation of a diversity committee that provides leadership with valuable feedback

3. Retain the Top Legal Talent

Getting talent into the firm only represents half of the challenge. Competition among law firms not only exists at the first-year associate level, but also drives lateral hires. Traditionally, law firms have been seen as long-term commitments, with associates working for years to reach the partner track. But increasing numbers of law firm attorneys are choosing lateral movement to a different law firm over tradition.

For law firm administrators, this means crafting strategies to keep firm attorneys happy and satisfied in their current positions. Here are some suggestions:

- Identify what drives lateral movement between law firms. For some attorneys, it may be dissatisfaction with the workplace environment. Others may feel stagnated with no opportunity for professional development or upward movement.
- Maintain competitive compensation. Money is the top motivator behind the lateral attorney movement. Consider whether the compensation paid to your firm's top talent is comparable to industry standards. If it isn't, communicate your concerns to firm leaders and advocate for better compensation packages.
- Maintain a satisfying firm culture. Attorneys want to work where they feel appreciated. By establishing a workplace environment that promotes those feelings, administrators can better position the firm to keep high-performing attorneys, as well as valuable legal support staff.

Offerings like flex time and remote work options can be useful. But firm administrators also need to ensure that the culture consistently feels inclusive and welcoming.

4. Technology Resistance

Legal tech innovations are constantly improving law office management and the practice of law. From legal practice management and document production to legal research and court document filing, advancements in technology have swept through the legal industry.

Unfortunately, many law firm administrators find it difficult to implement these new technologies due to resistance from firm members. Some senior attorneys may [not want to change their current methods](#) of getting tasks done. They may fail to recognize any value in implementing new technologies.

Addressing this resistance can be done through HR policies that require a certain number of tech training hours each month. Administrators can also consider [peer training programs](#) between more advanced and less advanced firm members. Law firms have a duty to stay abreast of standard legal industry technologies and firm administrators must stress this duty as an HR responsibility.

5. The Stress of Legal Practice

The practice of law is notoriously stressful. On a daily basis, attorneys work under tight deadlines to produce results that are free from error, beneficial to their clients and sometimes even life-changing. While attorneys stress about their outcomes, staff members stress over hovering attorneys and their long list of tasks.

Together, all of this creates an extremely stressful environment, where late hours and poor work-life balance become the norm. This leads to depression and anxiety, which are widespread problems among attorneys. Mental health issues cost law firms substantial amounts of money, so it is in the firm's interest to address these concerns.

While administrators cannot do much about court timelines and demanding clients, they can implement policies that seek to address the amount of stress experienced by law firm members. Administrators should consider policies such as:

- Mentorship programs and shared experiences that promote camaraderie and prevent negative feelings of isolation.
- Mental health self-assessment tools for firm members
- Requirements that firm attorneys and legal support staff take their regular vacations and work reasonable hours.

Praising attorneys for working early and staying late only exacerbates an already stressful situation. An unhealthy work environment can diminish productivity and leave attorneys feeling burnt out.

6. Continuing Education Requirements

Attorneys have a requirement to earn a certain number of continuing legal education credits each year. In most business environments, HR takes on the responsibility of tracking employee education efforts. However, within a law firm, CLE also comes along with reporting requirements. Particularly within a large firm, this can quickly become an all-consuming task. For this reason,

many firms choose to have a dedicated staff member to track and report CLE efforts. This individual may fall under the supervision of HR or the firm administrator.

In addition to CLE requirements, continuous education may also include such things as professional development training for [improved client contact](#), marketing techniques for improved rainmaking, and courtroom demeanor presentation skills. Law firm administrators may also implement training for legal support staff in the form of court filing rule updates and technology training.

7. Firm Hierarchy

The reporting structure of a law firm can be extremely convoluted and tricky to maneuver. The lines of supervision often overlap, creating an environment ripe for potential conflicts. For example, attorneys supervise the work of their support staff. However, those staff members report to HR for personnel needs. With this dynamic in place, a simple vacation request can become a big problem. While HR may approve the request, the supervising attorney may reject it due to a pressing case deadline.

Another unique characteristic of law firm hierarchy is the status system that commonly exists. Founding partners, shareholders, and top rainmakers often make up the leadership level of the firm. Non-equity partners fall a little below them, followed by attorneys, then legal support staff, and administrative support staff – in that respective order.

Under circumstances like these, it can be hard to identify where the HR department fits in and what power they have to effectively carry out their duties free from interruption. This creates a situation where law firm administrators routinely walk a fine line between HR and firm management.

8. Outsourcing Law Firm Tasks

Outsourcing has become a common practice within the legal community as law firms look for ways to offer a high quality of service while cutting costs. For instance, when a big case walks through the door, law firm leaders and administrators may find it more efficient to bring on contract attorneys and paralegals rather than pulling their existing staff from other client matters.

While outsourcing can promote profitability for the firm, it can present some challenges on the HR side. Firm administrators must ensure that contract workers remain in compliance with confidentiality and qualification. Even as temporary staff, these legal professionals must meet all professional requirements.

The Takeaway

Law firm HR duties often spill over into management and administration. As such, law firm administrators need to consider HR challenges and be prepared to address them as needed.

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