

How to Overcome Today's Recruiting Challenges

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It doesn't matter who you talk to. Check-in on any firm administrator or managing partner communication platform, and you will find conversations regarding the challenges of finding help. There is a shortage of good talent and the difficulty in recruiting that talent is felt across the board by firms of all sizes and locations.

The reasons for today's hiring challenges are as varied. However, as the number of firms faced with this roadblock increase, there are some common themes.

Lack of Available and Experienced Attorneys

There was a significant decrease in law school enrollment from 2010-2015 due to the shortage of law firm job opportunities during that period. Result: if you are looking for a mid-level attorney, you are going to be competing for a very small pool of potential candidates.

And Unstable Future Leads to Hesitancy in Moving to the Unknown

With the pandemic, many firms experienced an uncertain future. Firms with practice areas that were impacted by temporary changes in the legal climate saw layoffs and downsizing. With the fear of the unknown, many attorneys are loathe to making any change if they feel their current position is secure, even if they would have been planning to make a change before the pandemic hit.

Lack of administrative staff

Gone are the days when a large number of women went into the secretarial and paralegal fields if they wanted to work in a professional office. The legal secretary as a profession is a dying art. The fact that more women are finding other professional fields more available to them is a good thing; unfortunately, the result is a much smaller pool of qualified individuals to fill these administrative positions.

Higher expectations from younger applicants

Today's young professionals expect a positive work-life balance. It isn't necessarily a bad thing – maybe they are onto something. They also have high expectations from their employer and what the employer will do for them and their career. If firms are to continue to exist into the future, they need to find ways to address these needs and expectations but still be financially viable.

How Can We Overcome These and Other Recruiting Challenges?

When challenges arise in business, they can be looked upon as an opportunity for improvement and growth. The improvements you can make are endless – below are just a few.

Start with your job posting

Think of your job posting as a marketing opportunity. It should include more than just the expectations of the candidate – it should also include all or many of the reasons someone should want to work with your firm. (Take your pick from any of the ideas below!) The best places to post your attorney positions are with LinkedIn, your state bar association, area law schools. For administration and staff, you can also use indeed.com, paralegal associations, Facebook.

Your interview process should be well developed and organized

Good candidates want to work with sharp people. Your process should show your firm has its act together. Communicate with the candidate as to what the process will look like – they will likely meet first with an HR manager. That manager should then let them know what the next steps will look like so that they know what to expect and are not left in the dark wondering what, if anything, will happen next.

Allow firm stakeholders to interview candidates as appropriate. Allowing an associate to meet with a candidate they could be potentially working with does two things. It fosters your internal culture by showing your existing employees that what they think matters. It also shows the candidate that you value your employees enough to allow for this meeting. In addition, a happy employee's attitude will add to the candidate's desire to work with your firm. With the influx of Zoom and other video platforms, it is easy to make these meetings happen with little time commitment for either side.

Make sure to share your firm's culture during the interview process

Allowing the candidate to see that your firm cares enough to have core values in place is great. Showing them that you live by those core values through your authenticity and genuine caring throughout the interview process is even better.

Consider non-monetary benefits your firm may want to incorporate

Money alone is no longer enough to recruit and retain good employees. In addition to positive core values, think about what other benefits you can share. Some things you might consider:

- Professional development program
- Advancement opportunities
- Flexibility in work hours
- Ability to work from home all or part of the time

Hire Smart

With the potential hire pool so small, it can be tempting to hire someone who is “good enough” instead of waiting for someone who is a great fit. Bear in mind that if you settle, you will suffer lost productivity among your higher performers as they make up for the lack of performance in an underperformer. In addition, always remember that stellar employees want to work with stellar employees. If you lower your expectations, you stand to lose your high performers to a firm that will give them a high caliber of fellow team members.

One method you may want to consider in your hiring program is to use data analytics to determine what attributes are shared among your firm's highest performers. You can then make objective hiring decisions based on those attributes.

Consider alternative working arrangements

With the smaller pool of administrative professionals and the challenges firms face with the desire for work-life balance among young attorneys, alternative arrangements can be a win-win. Some alternative arrangements to consider:

- Job sharing
- Outsourcing
- Contract arrangements
- Freelancers

Your back office is an area that can benefit from outsourcing. Your firm may not need a highly paid administrator full-time, but you want someone with the experience and skill to oversee your firm to ensure its success. Outsourcing a qualified, experienced administrator can be a great resource for you, allowing you the resources of a highly experienced professional without the full-time salary and benefits that go along with it.

Allowing attorneys to work on a contract basis can be a win-win as well. You pay only for the hours they bill, and they work when they want to work.

Once you secure a great hire, don't forget to focus on retention

Just as it is easier to keep a client than it is to find a new one, it is easier to keep a good employee than it is to find a replacement. In addition, turnover is expensive and extremely time-consuming.

When it comes to your attorneys, consider how your firm's policies may impact your retention. For example, if your partnership has an origination-based financial system, it may hinder the incentive for senior partners to transition clients to up-and-coming attorneys. As a result, younger attorneys may leave out of frustration. You will lose good attorneys and have no clear succession plan in place to manage client relationships to keep them from leaving when a senior partner retires.

When it comes to non-lawyer employees, consider how they are treated in your firm. If they are made to feel they are second-class citizens because they are not an attorney, you will lose your top-notch professional staff to a firm that shows them the respect they deserve for what they bring to the table. The deep background and experience of your firm managers and staff is invaluable. Also bear in mind that clients will have a higher level of comfort with and loyalty to your firm if they are dealing with the same individuals year over year.

The Takeaway

While the lack of potential candidates is a challenge we are all experiencing, there are many actions you can take to make your firm stand out above the rest. By doing so, you will find candidates choosing your firm over the others and staying put for the long haul.

