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The Evolving Dynamics of Recruiting and Retaining Law Firm Talent

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The landscape of law firm recruitment is changing dramatically. Whether seeking to attract new attorneys out of law school, entice lateral hires, or retain current members, law firms are taking unprecedented steps away from tradition in hopes of engaging and keeping top legal talent.

The Candidate Perspective

Over the past year, many law firms have sought to entice new firm employees with signing bonuses, but these financial incentives proved to be only one piece of evaluation criteria for candidates.

When considering a move to a new firm or the merits of staying put, candidates are basing their decisions on much more than the firm paying the biggest bonus.

Conventional considerations like compensation, promotion potential, and bonuses remain part of the equation, along with some new metrics of comparison:

Reputation

The social and financial challenges brought on by the pandemic created an environment where candidates are increasingly evaluating potential employers based on their reputations. They classify socially responsible firms as those that took steps to protect their employees during shutdowns. They may have cut partner compensation to maintain associate salaries or provided vast support for remote work.

Candidates view these actions as real-world examples of a law firm's values and they factor them in when making employment decisions. They want more than a large paycheck. They want to work for law firms that align with their own values and beliefs.

Firm Culture

Law firm candidates have also become more cognizant of the culture that a firm offers. With the added stress of the last couple of years, candidates want an environment that makes them feel valued for more than their billable hours. They seek opportunities with firms that promote a healthy work-life balance and prioritize the mental health of firm members.

Today's candidates do their homework, researching "Best Places to Work" lists and searching social media for insight into a firm's culture. Working within a positive environment has become top-of-mind among law firm prospects. They have a new appreciation for the things they find most important and they are willing to hold out until they find them.

Flexibility

It took a global pandemic, but [the legal industry has finally accepted the value of remote working arrangements](#), and even with the return of some sense of normalcy, many candidates are simply unwilling to return to a traditional office setting with traditional office hours.

According to an American Bar Association (ABA) [survey](#), the vast majority of attorneys report feeling this way, with no desire for pre-pandemic office arrangements.

Of those lawyers surveyed, 36% stated their preference for the ability to set their in-office schedule from week to week. With this greater demand for remote work, candidates prefer law firms equipped with the technology to offer these options.

How Law Firms are Responding

Law firm leaders and administrators are taking note of these candidate expectations and are making adjustments to [their recruitment and retention efforts](#). A look at trends in the general legal landscape reveals increased usage of the following strategies:

Flexible Work Arrangements

Even the most traditional of law firms have recognized how critical flexibility has become in attracting quality candidates. That does not mean that 100% remote options need to be made available for every candidate. Instead, firms can craft various hybrid options to meet this need, which might look like two days of remote work and three days in the office each week. It may also mean that some attorneys work mornings in the office and remotely every afternoon.

The traditional 9-to-5 has quickly become an unpopular option. Legal professionals have gotten accustomed to spending more time with their families and having more control over their work-life balance. By offering at least some level of flexibility, law firms better leverage initiatives to recruit and retain talent.

Flexibility offers an additional value. Remote working arrangements can substantially widen the candidate net for new hires. Geographic limitations are lessened so that firms can seek talent from broader markets with lower salary averages.

Diversity Initiatives

Corporations are not the only entities ramping up diversity efforts. Law firm leaders are also recognizing the value of these initiatives. Internally, it creates a more enjoyable workplace where attorneys from various races, genders, abilities, and sexual orientations feel valued. Externally, a significant percentage of candidates consider the diversity of a firm when making employment decisions.

The customary practice of solely recruiting from top law schools ignores a vast market for

incredible and diverse talent. Along those same lines, it may not benefit firms to only seek lateral hires from the biggest law firms. Substantial talent can be found at legal practices of all sizes and law firms are beginning to recognize that fact.

Redefining Ideal Candidate Profiles

Law firms use Ideal Candidate Profiles (ICPs) to identify qualities, characteristics, and achievements they desire in a potential hire. These tools have been used for years, but recent changes within the legal recruitment realm have brought about a need for adjustments.

Law firm recruiters are taking a serious look at their current ICPs and making changes to meet this new normal. Consider criteria such as technical skills or a proven track record of success working virtually.

Make Mental Health a Priority

Stress, overwork, and burnout have long been associated with the legal community. While some industry conversations have taken place over the years about the dangers of these working habits, discussions about employee mental health really began to take center stage during the early days of the pandemic.

In response, many law firms have implemented programs aimed at preventing burnout and promoting mental wellness. Tools like regular check-ins, free access to mental health resources, and greater flexibility are being used to demonstrate a commitment to the emotional, wellness, and development needs of firm personnel. Recruiters should highlight these initiatives to attract potential candidates, and firms can leverage them to keep their top talent happy within the firm.

The Takeaway

In order to remain competitive in today's legal recruiting environment, firms need to step outside of the traditional sign-on bonus and instead look at other benefits of interest.

By offering flexible work arrangements, improving diversity initiatives, reevaluating ICPs, and prioritizing mental health, you put your organization in the best possible position to attract and retain top talent.

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