



5 Critical Talent Management Priorities Facing Law Firm Leaders

In today's world, there is no shortage of challenges keeping managing partners awake at night. From the initial pandemic response and the shift to a remote work environment, to reforecasting firm financials and responding to demand pressure, the job of law firm leaders has never been more difficult. We see one particular set of challenges receiving insufficient management time and attention in the current environment - talent management. For a variety of reasons, firms simply are not investing the creativity and resources needed to ensure effective talent management in today's unusual and heavily-virtual law firm environment.

Below are five of the most critical talent management priorities facing law firms today.

#1: Integration of New Hires

As firms bring on a new class of associates and/or lateral lawyers over the coming months, integration will present new challenges. Without in-person connections and relationship building, some new hires will not develop sufficient partner trust and rapport, impacting the matters they get staffed on, the specializations they develop (or fail to develop), and their long-run advancement opportunities. If new hires do not develop the relationships needed to become fully integrated into the firm and thrive as productive professionals, the consequences (e.g. underproductivity, low morale, departure) will result in hard and soft costs for the firm. Ensuring effective integration of new hires in a virtual environment requires that firms adopt creative methods for building strong, 1:1 relationships with new hires. These methods must factor in the likelihood that true in-person work may not resume until mid-2021, and stage relationship-building strategies to ensure ongoing progress over time.

#2: Succession Planning and Implementation

Pre-pandemic, law firms were already grappling with the challenges of a wave of baby boomer retirements and the need for effective succession planning to retain senior lawyers' clients and expertise. Unfortunately, the pandemic and a remote working environment has only made succession planning and implementation more complicated. Succession requires close partnering of outgoing and succeeding lawyers in order to develop sufficient trust to transition the senior lawyer's valued client relationships. Without in-person contact, firms are struggling now more than ever to establish that partnering relationship and ensure that appropriate transition action is being taken.

To overcome these challenges, firms will need to adopt creative transitioning approaches and impose greater accountability. Firms might consider a series of seminars with techniques for transitioning client relationships in a virtual environment (ideally led by a senior partner demonstrating effective transition). Also, as in the past, developing detailed succession plans with specific transition actions remains key to success. However, in this remote environment, the follow up on the implementation of those plans is particularly critical, so firm leaders will need to find additional ways to create accountability and ensure transition progress, reenergize lawyers involved, and push past any remote work obstacles.

#3: Substantive Training

Substantive training is one of the most obvious and necessary talent management needs facing law firms given the impact on services delivered. Pre-pandemic, a number of law firms had implemented virtual academies offering substantive training for lawyers by practice area. In some cases, these programs were quite sophisticated and formalized online offerings. Other firms were not quite as advanced with use of technology, nor as rigorous in terms of the content or schedule of offerings. For

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firms with less formal substantive training programs, there is an urgent need to invest in and develop robust programming supported by effective virtual learning technologies. Firms would be wise to access tools and systems that have already been developed on the open market, and to leverage the use of outside vendors - both of which will increase the speed and efficacy with which firms are able to implement improved substantive training in the virtual environment.

#4: Client Service, Relationship Management, and Professionalism Skills

When it comes to training and professional development for client relationship management and service skills, many firms operated informally pre-pandemic, relying on in-person, on-the-job, development opportunities to demonstrate effective client service, relationship management and communication approaches. Going forward, law firms will need to be far more deliberate and comprehensive in providing a full suite of virtual training and professional development programming for lawyers - taking into account the changed nature of client relationship management approaches in the current environment. This should include training on foundational service characteristics (e.g. responsiveness), effective virtual client communications and presentations, client team management, virtual client expansion, and new client pitch efforts.

#5: Engagement

Finally, and perhaps the greatest talent management challenge of our current time, firm leaders must continue to seek partner, lawyer and staff engagement. We are starting to see the pain points from remote working. In the first several months following the start of the crisis, virtual partner meetings experienced record attendance. Some firms reported higher partner participation in weekly calls than they had previously seen in monthly or even quarterly partner meetings. However, as the pandemic has worn on and Zoom burnout has set in, engagement has waned.

As people businesses, law firms depend heavily on engagement for stability and glue purposes, not to mention other critical components of culture, such as teamwork and strategic alignment. When members become disengaged, law firms face greater risks of instability and departures.

To overcome waning engagement, firm leaders must think creatively about a multi-fold approach. First, and as discussed in our July Insight, focusing firm members on specific, near term, and high value strategic priorities can help develop a shared sense of purpose. Strategy and direction provide firms the opportunity to re-engage partners and lawyers more broadly, helping them feel that they are part of something bigger and providing momentum and direction in their professional life, which causes them to want to participate more fully.

Second, firms must seek creative ways to compensate for a lack of in-person connectivity in order to maintain the relationships and connections that bind firm members to the organization. This may take shape through reassignment of specific leadership roles (e.g. Office Managing Partners) to focus entirely on 1:1 outreach and relationship building in the remote environment; rolling out a firmwide "buddy" system to connect previously unconnected firm members across offices and practices; launching additional or reinvigorated client teams; forming cross-practice teams around a firmwide client-targeting initiative; and widening participation of training and onboarding activities to involve a broader group of firm members.

Of course, there is no single, right answer to the complex challenge of how law firms should bind firm members to the organization in this unusual environment. However, by maintaining engagement as a critical talent management priority and actively looking for creative ways to build engagement, firm leaders are more likely to maintain the interconnectedness necessary to keep members committed to the enterprise.

Given the newness and complexity of adopting more thoughtful and effective approaches in each of these areas, many firms are simply doing the bare minimum and crossing fingers until they resume in-person work. However, when we look back on this period, good enough simply won't be good enough. The pandemic and a virtual working environment are likely to be a reality for law firms for some time, impacting a full year or more of firm operations. Even in offices where lawyers are starting to return, safety protocols limit in-person interaction, so most communication remains virtual. Firms that invest the time, energy, and resources to develop creative and effective talent management approaches in the virtual environment will benefit

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