



How to Nurture, Develop, Maintain and Sustain Your Lateral Hires

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By Debra Forman

Leaving a law firm for the first time is understandably difficult for many long-standing attorneys, also known as "lifers." Indeed, the "breakup" may generate complex and competing emotions. Those taking leave due to "pull factors," such as career-focused opportunities, may experience conflicting loyalties and guilty feelings about leaving, not only during the departure phase, but even after establishing themselves at their new firms. Deep ties to originating firms are also evident even for those separating as a result of "push factors" such as compensation, promotion or philosophical disagreements. After the resentment dissipates, some attorneys carry the responsibility of their parting long after their departure. And in cases where attorneys are asked to leave their originating firms, some try to undo or deter their dismissals, in part because of an enduring sense of connection that is hard to break.

Loyalty and Attachment

Why do some "lifers" experience conflicting emotions during and after they have made their decision to leave their originating firms? Two words: loyalty and attachment. Exiting lawyers may regret losing their sense of attachment and, consequently, resist letting go of the feeling of comfort they have achieved at the firms they are leaving. They associate themselves and their successes with their original firms. Their first firm is where they "grew up" as lawyers. Their originating firm has provided them with years of development, legal and law practice foundations, and strong relationships and friendships with their partners and associates. Growing up at these firms, many attorneys socialize with their colleagues outside the office and have strong personal ties that connect them to their partners and their clients. Former mentors and mentees hang out together and continue their nurturing relationships at more collegial levels long after their formal assignments end.

Exiting lawyers are very proud members of their originating firms, right up to the moment they leave. And these attorneys do not necessarily sever these deep-rooted relationships. Even after they leave, many attorneys send new or conflicted work to former colleagues and maintain social relationships. Even though they are no longer partners together, the trust is still there. In the end, although they are leaving the original firms for other opportunities, they are still proud to have been associated with these firms and do not hesitate to remind others of their formative years at their starter firms.

How do law firms instill feelings of loyalty and attachment to their home grown attorneys? Law firm culture, relationships and investment in talent development are three key pillars in nurturing, developing, maintaining and sustaining firm talent. These foundations foster engagement and are key reasons why loyalty and attachment can make it difficult to leave the initial firm.

What About Laterals?

Laterals moving between firms, on the other hand, present a totally different scenario. Granted, once attorneys have left one firm, it is easier to leave a second or third firm. Also, laterals' departures can typically be more opportunistic, financial-focused and less emotional, where loyalty and attachment issues are not competing with the laterals' decisions to leave.

Those broad reasons aside, when focusing on attorney attachment and loyalty, how many departing laterals really feel the same emotional tugs as "lifers" do when they leave their first firms? More important, how effective and proactive are law firms at instilling loyalty and attachment in their laterals? It has been demonstrated that lawyers will leave, regardless of the grip of emotions anchoring them to their firms, but they leave without breaking all bonds. However, when there are no ties (or very loose ones) binding lawyers to their firms, there will be no returns on investment for any of the affected parties. If laterals are not integrated deeply into their current firms, they will be easy pickings or flight risks.

What can law firms do to integrate their laterals into their firms so that their laterals establish and develop loyalty and attachments to their organizations? A definite start is to view the nurturing and development of new laterals as institutionally as the firms view the nurturing and development of their summer associates and new class of associates. This does not mean to simply place laterals into pre-existing summer/new associate orientation programs. This "filling in the hole" will not glue down laterals and may cause the opposite effect. What is suggested is that the same care, time and energy that goes into defining and running a program that will attract

and retain young lawyers should be applied to developing a fulsome program for lateral hires that will meet their unique integration and development needs.

Tips for Anchoring Your Laterals

Here are 10 tips to consider if you want to anchor your laterals at your law firms.

1. Start Integrating Laterals When You Are Ready to Offer the Position

The integration process for lateral hires should commence when firms are considering bringing laterals inside. At this stage of negotiations, the process has moved beyond kicking the tires for both sides. The firms and laterals should each have some skin in the game regarding their respective commitments: Firms should introduce laterals to key players, share deeper firm/financial insights, and ask similarly probing questions of their future firm members. Laterals should be focused and trusting in their discussions and ready to share more openly with their future firms. At this stage of the hiring process, the lateral should be feeling more like a colleague than a candidate.

2. Deal with Internal Concerns Prior to Lateral Hire/Arrival

For lateral integration to succeed, all parties have to be working together to achieve the desired outcomes. Concerned parties include other firm members whose buy-in is crucial for the smooth outcome and success of the new recruit(s). Lawyers who are taken by surprise with news of the arrival of new colleague(s), and could feel challenged by the addition of these attorneys, may not assist laterals in gaining loyalty and attachment ties to the new firm. In fact, these affected lawyers could leave, if they feel threatened by the decision. Get these lawyers involved in the process.

3. Designate a Firm Professional As the Go-To Person for Laterals

To help laterals stick to their new firms, it is very important to have a designated and dedicated "lateral glue" individual, who is capable of addressing lateral needs. This individual should be a senior firm administrator (for example, talent management or recruitment director) who has particular firm knowledge that will assist laterals in settling in. This person will help to shepherd laterals through the new firm's procedures and will be able to ensure that lateral concerns can be addressed quickly.

4. Make Sure Practice Group Leaders Are Available for Hand-Holding

All laterals, no matter how senior they are, will need some form of hand holding in their first few months/year. Wanting to succeed at their new firms, laterals experience and display a wide range of insecurities as they settle into their new homes. Some may report on every business development foray they make, to ensure that the firm knows they are working their lists. Others may worry how they are being perceived by their new firms and will check in regularly. If practice group leaders and senior firm management are proactive and follow up directly and regularly with new laterals, their visits, attention and "love" will go a long way toward helping their laterals settle in. Adding new lateral accomplishments to the firms' websites and marketing pieces will be an effective way to anchor these new lawyers in their new firms.

5. Demystify Firm Billing and Financial Processes

Laterals want to hit the ground running when they move firms. Dealing with client billings and other financial details will be top of mind. Not all law firms follow the same administrative procedures; firm billing procedures and practices, rate assignment and financial processes differ between firms. As home-grown lawyers would have had years to grow into these practices, it cannot be assumed that new laterals will instantly understand their new firm's accounting procedures. Setting up firm accounting orientation sessions for laterals, and any staff they may bring with them, during their first few days at the firm should be at the top of your firm's integration checklist. Reinforcing in the early months the financial and billing nuances will be greatly appreciated by your new colleagues.

6. Provide Opportunities to Mix with Firm Lawyers

Providing laterals with regular occasions where they can meet and discuss their practices with other firm lawyers helps build loyalty and attachment among new recruits. There is no better test for laterals in evaluating their decision to join a new firm than the availability of new client opportunities. Having new lawyers discuss their practices at group meetings, write internal or client memos, or get involved on pitches will go a long way toward assimilating them into your firm.

7. Offer External Lateral Coaching

Providing laterals with external coaching in the areas of business development and practice management is an effective way to ensure that these lawyers succeed and stay at their new firms. External coaches will also provide laterals with sanctioned third parties with whom they can confidentially resolve issues and work to grow their businesses.

8. Take Advantage of Lateral's Previous Firm Expertise

Some laterals may have been involved with the management of their prior firms in varied ways (recruitment, practice group leaders, management, committees). When incoming firms take advantage of lateral expertise, the collegial and effective benefits to both firm and lateral are lasting.

9. Ask Laterals for Ongoing Feedback on Integration

As is done with many firm procedures, check in regularly with your laterals on how well the firm is meeting their needs. These are great opportunities to see how these lawyers are integrating, how they perceive the firm, and what else the firm can do to ensure their integration and success.

10. Stop Labeling Your Laterals As 'Laterals'

A key move to ensuring that laterals feel an attachment and loyalty to their new firm: Stop referring to them as laterals! At some firms, regardless of the years non-originating lawyers have dedicated to their (new) firm, they are still called laterals. At what point do these lawyers finally lose their lateral labels? Internal firm communications and cultures play key roles in assimilating new lawyers into the firm. One sure way of getting rid of the labels: Do not use them or, if needed, do not use them for long.

Conclusion

By nurturing and developing their new colleagues as diligently as they do their home-grown lawyers, firms will enable these individuals to build, maintain and sustain strong relationships at their new firms. If done successfully, firms can instill the same loyalty and attachment in the new recruits as they do in their "lifers."

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