

# LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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## CM Feature

COMMUNICATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGEMENT

# Keeping In Touch

More firms are creating online communities to stay connected to former employees.

Years ago, when an attorney left — particularly to work at a competitor — law firms didn't always leap at the chance to keep in touch.



**ERIN BRERETON**

Owner, Chicago Journalist Media

*“Many of our alumni have become our best clients; some have introduced us to new clients, and some have gone to work for existing clients.”*

**ELIZABETH CLAPS**

Alumni Relations Manager  
Cleary Gottlieb



Today, however, at many firms, the attitude toward employee exits is decidedly more agreeable — friendly, even.

Consider Cleary Gottlieb, where firm members, according to Alumni Relations Manager Elizabeth Claps, speak with former employees “on a daily, if not hourly, basis.”

The 1,200-attorney firm also hosts three alumni events a year, along with regional and practice-specific events, and reaches out periodically to its 3,153 registered former employees.

In recent years, it has also added former employees to its roster — and expanded its list of business contacts.

“We have several ‘boomerang’ [employees] currently with us, some of whom have become partners,” Claps says. “Many of our alumni have become our best clients; some have introduced us to new clients, and some have gone to work for existing clients.”

### ALUMNI NETWORK ADVANTAGES

As of 2006, nearly half of the AmLaw 100 firms had launched an alumni program, according to the American Bar Association.

Tony Audino, who helped launch Microsoft's alumni network in the 1990s and currently serves as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of corporate alumni community provider Conenza, estimates 80 to 90 percent of large U.S. firms maintain a network of former employees.

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*“Corporate alumni networks [are] a win-win situation. At a university, when the education is over, the alumni give back by engagement. In the corporate world, there is a permanent giving and taking within the alumni network.”*

#### PETER BRUNNER

Senior Consultant  
Alumni Impact



*“Alumni networks create a sense of community where lawyers can have intimate, honest and open dialogue around the challenges they face in their current roles, and best practices for success.”*

“If you don’t,” Audino says, “you’re at a complete disadvantage.”

A 2015 Conenza corporate alumni study involving law, consulting and other professional service firms found that brand advocacy, talent acquisition and business development were the top three drivers for investing in a corporate alumni network.

Like Cleary Gottlieb, other firms have found former employees are often willing to connect them with new business opportunities.

Being able to easily reach out to former employees who left, due to recessionary cutbacks or external opportunities, through an alumni network can also help firms fill open positions quickly. Rehired employees are 40 percent more productive in their first quarter, cost half as much to hire and tend to stay longer, according to the *Harvard Business Review*.

Industry information can be another benefit. Attorneys can use alumni site communication tools, such as message boards, to obtain career information and advice from peers.

At the same time, online conversations can help law firms gain insight into what amenities candidates are looking for and find out about new industry trends.

Employee alumni networks designed to help former firm members connect and find out about job opportunities can also help firms brand themselves as a caring, engaged employer — which may resonate with law students, young attorneys and other potential hires.

“Corporate alumni networks [are] a win-win situation,” says Dr. Peter Brunner, Senior Consultant at Alumni Impact, which helps set up and manage corporate alumni networks. “At a university, when the education is over, the alumni give back by engagement. In the corporate world, there is a permanent giving and taking within the alumni network.”

#### CRAFTING AN EFFECTIVE ALUMNI PROGRAM

Establishing a successful employee alumni network, however, takes more than a few email blasts.

If your firm has considered creating an alumni community — or is currently managing an underperforming network — the following tips can help you efficiently unearth and engage former employees.

**Confirm You Have the Right Resources in Place.** Due to the time involved, adding alumni network management to a current employee’s task list may be difficult. The cost of hiring a full- or part-time community manager could be worth the investment.

**ABBY RAANAN**

National Alumni Relations  
Manager, Drinker Biddle



“Say a firm spends \$25,000 for a person to run the network part-time, \$20,000 on the technology and hosts two \$10,000 events — for less than \$100,000 a year, the firm can generate millions in revenue coming from the alumni network over time,” Audino says. “From a business development point, as a law firm, that’s a couple of projects.”

Creating an alumni network can often be more of a challenge for smaller firms because they generally have less internal resources and former employees — potentially, according to Audino, just 30 to 40 alumni for a firm that’s been in business for 10 years.

“What I’d do in that situation is have an annual dinner get-together, send maybe a quarterly or once or twice a year note about what the firm is doing,” he says. “Even if it’s nobody’s full-time job to manage the community, you can certainly maintain a relationship.”

**Reach Out the Right Way.** To prevent launch delays, incorporate a step into your exit interview process to gather contact information, such as a personal email and/or cell phone number, which may be less likely to change than a home or work address.

If your firm hasn’t kept copious contact records, Abby Raanan, National Alumni Relations Manager for 620-attorney firm Drinker Biddle’s 2,200-attorney alumni network, recommends using state bar and social media sites.

“I’m connected to a lot of people through LinkedIn, and whenever I see someone moved jobs, I send them a personal email to make sure they’ve updated their contact information with us,” Raanan says.

**Consider Offering Incentives.** Some of alumni software provider Insala’s clients offer discounts they’ve negotiated with stores or other businesses to encourage alumni to participate, according to David Goggin, Managing Director of Insala.

Tech items or other giveaways may also encourage new users to sign up.

“Some people offer a contest, which can work really well,” Audino says. “Or offer a Starbucks \$10 gift card if you give your email address and join.”

Labor and employment law firm Ogletree Deakins, which launched its alumni network in April 2015, provides free access to webinars and some national seminars. The 750-attorney firm has also offered free on-site educational sessions on a variety of workplace management topics.

“The free training giveaways we’ve provided related to our quarterly alumni newsletter have been well-received,” says Jim McGrew, Chief Marketing Officer (CMO).

**Mix Online and In-Person Events.** Recently, Ogletree Deakins hosted its annual in-house counsel conference in Phoenix — which included a small reception that let firm members connect with in-house alumni, part of the network’s ongoing effort, according to McGrew, to add alumni resources and activities.

For many firms, though, virtual events may need to play a significant, if not central role.

*“Building a business development channel through your alumni community is one of the most profitable ways for a medium- to large-sized firm to generate business.”*

**TONY AUDINO**

Chief Executive Officer  
Conenza



"In-person events are very important and much more efficient to get in touch," Brunner says. "[However], online network groups are important if not all of the alumni are close enough to join the invitation."



*"It's great to have goals around the number of employees you want to engage, but also what kind of experience you want them to have."*

**DAVID GOGGIN**

Managing Director  
Insala



**Communicate Carefully.** In some cases, alumni programs push out a lot of messaging. "It's basically a marketing campaign for them to encourage people to participate in the network," Goggin says.

Other firms prefer less frequent contact.

Drinker Biddle's newsletter is sent periodically to its 2,200-member alumni network. "There is a consideration that there's a competition for attorneys' time, so we want to be cognizant of the amount of emails people are getting," Raanan says.

There's no defined right or wrong frequency, according to Audino. But you have to be consistent.

"It's important you establish a cadence to make sure it makes sense to members, and stick to it," he says. "People won't show up if they don't know what to expect."

**Make the Network Part of Your Employee Experience.** Former employees aren't the only ones who can participate in alumni networks. "Some firms encourage current employees to take a very active role and partake in events, as well," Goggin says.

Your firm's overall approach to employee relations will likely have a big impact on its attempt to launch an alumni network. Employees need to know the firm appreciates them and supports their future — wherever it takes them.

"You need to make sure the culture is one where lawyers and people at the firm understand that people do come and go, but you're always welcome back, and that we want to maintain contact with you," Raanan says.

**Don't Expect Overnight Success.** Chances are, your network may require some adjustments over time, once you see how users respond.

Goggin cautions against zoning in too much on number targets, as they may not accurately represent what elements will encourage members to regularly participate.

"It's great to have goals around the number of employees you want to engage, but also what kind of experience you want them to have," Goggin says. "It's important to understand what different

*"The free training giveaways we've provided related to our quarterly alumni newsletter have been well-received."*

**JIM MCGREW**

Chief Marketing Officer  
Ogletree Deakins



groups are involved — and what they might be looking for, in terms of content experience and tools.”

If you do, the public relations and revenue-building possibilities are endless.

“Building a business development channel through your alumni community is one of the most profitable ways for a medium- to large-sized firm to generate business,” Audino says. “All you have to do is set up the network and treat them well — and you’ll get business flowing in through your door.”

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Brereton is a legal industry marketing consultant and freelance journalist who has written about the legal industry, finance, business and other topics for more than 50 legal associations, magazines, websites and other publications.

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#### A SAFE SPACE

##### SHOULD YOU KEEP YOUR WEBSITE CLOSED?

To encourage participation, some law firms make some, or all, of their alumni network website public. On Ogletree Deakins’ alumni site, for example, a few items — featured articles about community members and event listings — are available to nonregistered users.

“[But] to access the newsletter, you’re required to be part of the network,” says Chief Marketing Officer Jim McGrew.

Other firms believe a completely closed environment will help encourage discussion.

“Alumni networks create a sense of community where lawyers can have intimate, honest and open dialogue around the challenges they face in their current roles, and best practices for success — as well as their own personal and professional milestones and current and future professional direction and goals,” says Abby Raanan, National Alumni Relations Manager at Drinker Biddle.

That’s one reason Cleary Gottlieb never considered making its alumni website public, according to Alumni Relations Manager Elizabeth Claps.

“It is closed for a number of reasons, including security and privacy,” she says. “Individuals already

have other networking/social media tools at their disposal, so by keeping ours a closed entity, it ensures the family-like feel and safe exchange of information.”

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