

By Charles A. Volkert, Executive Director of [Robert Half Legal®](#), a legal staffing service specializing in the placement of attorneys, paralegals, legal administrators and other legal professionals with law firms and corporate legal departments.

## **Make Succession Planning a Priority**

It's easy to overlook best practices during difficult economic cycles, but law firms should think twice before putting succession planning initiatives on the back burner. Yet, even in good times, many firms find they have little time to plan for the departure of senior or managing attorneys. Fifty-three percent of attorneys polled by Robert Half Legal said their law firm or legal department does not have a formal succession plan in place for key positions.

An often-cited reason for inaction in this area is that those in leadership positions may not have immediate plans to leave their jobs, but unplanned departures – either permanent or for an extended period – are always a possibility. Time management issues can be another obstacle, as top lawyers and legal administrators may feel that they are simply too busy focusing on more pressing concerns. Another factor may be a natural reluctance on the part of many professionals to even consider the notion that they could ever be “replaced.” Though everyone likes to be valued for their contributions, adequately preparing others to continue after the exit of a key professional is as important an aspect of sound law firm management as is day-to-day leadership.

### **Talent Trends**

Based on demographic trends alone, demand for experienced legal talent is likely to spike in the years ahead. Not only are large numbers of retirements expected among veteran lawyers, but the need to tap junior staff to eventually fill talent gaps is complicated by the comparatively smaller numbers of available next-generation workers. Moreover, even in a period of rising unemployment, law firms and corporate legal departments continue to struggle to find attorneys for in-demand practice areas such as litigation, bankruptcy, intellectual property, tax and corporate and securities law.

As a result, it remains critical for law firms to keep one eye on planning for the transfer of professional and institutional knowledge to a new generation of leaders. Even if older baby boomers stay on the job beyond the traditional retirement age, the process of identifying and grooming attorneys for advanced leadership roles can take years. Planning for succession before a transition is imminent allows for an orderly and complete transfer of knowledge and client relationships, ensuring that firms can maintain productivity during periods of change.

### **Succession Planning Benefits**

Another compelling reason to engage in succession planning is that it helps legal administrators and others who have hiring responsibilities identify recruitment needs. By knowing with certainty whether there are capable in-house successors for key roles, firms can determine whether they need to focus on professional development of in-house staff or jumpstart their efforts to recruit new talent.

Planning for leadership transition can also have a positive effect on retention. The process of singling out tomorrow's leaders sends a message to top performers that their contributions are recognized and valued and that there is room for advancement. This creates motivation for them to stay on the job.

### **Building a Plan**

Succession planning initiatives do not have to be highly formalized to be effective. A firm's leaders can simply begin considering various "what if" scenarios that could occur from a personnel standpoint and attempting to identify possible replacements for key roles, including certain support positions, or formulate other contingency plans.

A typical first step is to identify and prioritize the personal and professional qualities that are essential for success in a particular role. For example, in identifying an attorney to assume a management role, which is most critical: having strong organizational skills, overseeing project workflow or managing client relationships? What other competencies should be identified?

The next step is selecting high-potential individuals who are most capable of assuming greater responsibility. This does not mean anointing a single "heir apparent" for each senior position, but rather trying to define a pipeline of future talent for critical roles. Firms can then better target developmental opportunities for promising attorneys and associates.

Often a firm's leaders already have individuals in mind for future roles, but implementing a succession plan requires more than just having a vague idea of who might be chosen were circumstances to change. It involves holding a discussion with protégées to explain that they are being singled out for more advanced responsibilities in the future, and actively preparing them to take on these challenges.

Although succession planning does require additional effort – on top of the daily responsibilities of managing a law firm – it can also provide those in leadership roles with greater peace of mind by knowing they have done what they can to position their firms for ongoing success.

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