

integrating Laterals



Administrators play a critical role in implementation and enabling harmonious integration that supports the firm's growth plans and makes it an extraordinary place to work.

Lateral additions seem to be almost a weekly occurrence – and, make no mistake about it, they have a significant impact on whether or not a firm is an extraordinary, or even a good, place to work.

In a continual effort to differentiate themselves from the competition and increase revenues, many law firms are continually and actively seeking to add practice areas or specialty groups and individual attorneys with a good book of business or special expertise. Without close integration of new groups, a firm forfeits some of the advantages of adding them in the first place. Managing partners of

firms that have successfully achieved new practice area integration say there never can be too much attention to integration.

So your Lateral Hiring Committee has successfully attracted desirable, experienced lawyers to the firm. Management and the partners have voted them in. Whether the focus is on an individual or a group, how do you assure that the laterals and the practices will be integrated effectively into the firm? Integration has two parts: the internal, which should come first; and outreach to clients and the public (marketplace).

INTERNAL INTEGRATION

The necessary steps for successful integration include:

- **Reassure longtime firm members and employees.** Reveal and deal with any concerns that the status of existing practices, partners, or associates will be threatened by bringing in new blood. This pertains to administrative staff as well. They will want to know if and how their roles and reporting relationships may change.
- **Formally charge one person with the responsibility of being the integrator or ombudsman.** Otherwise too much of the integration process will tend to be neglected or fall through the cracks. Likely candidates for this role are the firm's administrator, marketing director, recruiting director or human resources director. In any case, the managing partner or a member of senior management should be closely involved, as should the marketing professional. Internal, as well as external, marketing will be necessary to make the integration and cross-selling a success.
- **Integrate practices and staffs.** Physical location is an important element. Organizing this and making it work is a key role for administrators. It is often a stressful responsibility that must be handled with both diplomacy and firmness. Office assignments may need to be shifted. Face-to-face contact in the early stages is crucial, supplemented by internal communication media such as e-mail, Web site, newsletters, and memos. Staff should be assigned to work together, as their cooperation will ease the way for the lawyers and prevent "ghettoization" of the recent arrivals.
- **Assign "buddies" to the new people.** Give each partner, associate, and staff person a counterpart to go to with questions. The buddy should also introduce each new person to others in the firm as well as to formal procedures and "the way we do things here." Encourage frequent contact, and keep the buddy system in operation for six months.
- **Conduct presentations for partners and associates.** Schedule a formal series of presentations regarding the capabilities and accomplishments of the new lawyers and those of existing practice groups. Ask each to suggest opportunities for cross-selling and to

describe the help and support they desire.

The process of preparing and making these presentations every time new expertise is added will have an added benefit: The firm will be kept up-to-date on new developments and capabilities firmwide and will have a forum for requesting help.

- Coordinate and enhance professional development. Training is often overlooked as a priority when laterals are brought in, but it is a key component of melding cultures and assuring consistent quality of service delivery.

THE WELCOME WAGON

Wooing new arrivals requires three components: a focus on internal communications, early and often; a clear message of value to clients, referral sources, and the public; and visible, tangible support from management, partners, and staff. Laterally acquired attorneys judge the hospitality and depth of commitment of their new firms by:

- how widespread introductions to other partners throughout the firm are at the courting stage and after;
- how early the integrating process starts;
- how the firm publicizes the new arrivals' capabilities;
- how many partners initiate cross-selling; and
- how welcoming and helpful staff and administrative people are.

Planning should begin even before the acquisition is definite so that action can be taken immediately. The internal focus is as important as the external one in the early stages. Building familiarity and comfort level between laterals and longer-tenured attorneys and staff and integrating the people and practices are necessary foundations for marketing support and cross-selling. Here are some tips:

- Plan for integration during the negotiation stage, and involve marketing professionals (in confidence) as soon as talks get very serious.
- Get announcements out promptly, especially to clients and referral sources.
- Go overboard on briefings and communication. Be clear about where laterals at all levels can go for help and information. Keep up the heavy communication and attention for at least six months.



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- Plan informal and more formal social occasions, a few of which involve the laterals' families. Have welcoming lunches and cocktail parties. Invite clients and the laterals' clients.
- Intersperse lateral and existing lawyers' offices to ensure day-to-day meeting. Mix up working groups to foster interaction.
- Put the new lateral partners on firm committees early on so they are given firmwide responsibilities and will interact with long-tenured partners.
- Seek laterals' input on firm decisions, because they can bring fresh ideas and perspectives regarding what has or hasn't worked elsewhere.
- Harness the laterals' energy. Use the new burst of enthusiasm to motivate and reinvigorate the existing ranks.

FOCUS ON CLIENTS FIRST

The external effort should focus first on clients and then general publicity. Make clients comfortable. As soon as the firm can go public with word of the new additions, clients should be informed in as personal a way as possible. Beyond the typical announcements, clients should get phone calls or at least a personal letter from the attorneys they work with most or the senior partners on their matters to tell them about the new practice and/or the people brought in.

If possible, personal introductions should be set up. If a group of lawyers is acquired from another firm, it is important to make clients comfortable with the additions and see the benefit to them.

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

When an entire department is added to a firm, the new lawyers will be difficult to assimilate unless the firm makes a concerted effort from the beginning to integrate them into all facets of the firm's governance and social milieu. Clients are sensitive to internal tensions and will not accept the new practice area as an integral part of the firm unless

the attorneys in the firm clearly do so.

When a lateral is brought in to add a new service, there is often insufficient communication to other partners and to existing clients as to how the new service would be useful to clients. Occasionally there is even resistance to the creation of any strategy that would familiarize the client base with the new practice. This is short-sighted. Some partners may want to "protect their clients" from others who are not well known to them. However, if introductions and cross-selling are not part of the business and marketing strategy, there is no sense in making the practice part of the firm. It will simply be an expense and an emotional drain.

Whether the new specialty results from a strategic decision or an unplanned opportunity, communication is the key to acceptance, integration, and success. When existing firm members redirect their practices from a slow area to one that has greater potential, they, too, need to be supported by additional, clear communications to change their colleagues' already ingrained perceptions of what they do. This aspect is often overlooked, with the attention going primarily to new additions.

The equation for making lateral additions work to the benefit of the new partners and the firm is a combination of chemistry and strategy. Both the new and the existing partners must have a commitment to it and participate actively in the integration process. Administrators play a crucial role in implementation and enabling harmonious integration that supports the firm's growth plans and makes it a great place to work. ✱

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