

# *Home Sweet*



# ~~Home~~ Work

**HOW DO YOU MAKE WORK FEEL LESS LIKE WORK? MAKE IT EXTRAORDINARY! UNDERSTAND WHAT IT TAKES TO MOTIVATE EMPLOYEES AND IMPROVE THE WORK ENVIRONMENT TO DRIVE YOUR FIRM'S OVERALL SUCCESS.**

*I*s creating a great place to work inconsistent with the practice of law? Many might say that law firms cannot afford to spend time and money on creating environments that employees would find satisfying and supportive. Frankly, however, law firms can't afford not to look for ways to increase employee satisfaction and decrease turnover. Providing a work environment where employees can "trust the people they work for, have pride in what they do and enjoy people they work with" (a "great place to work" as defined by the Great Place to Work Institute), goes hand in hand with increased employee satisfaction and the firm's improved financial performance.

## **DEFINING A GREAT PLACE TO WORK**

A great place to work is one where employees feel supported professionally and personally and are motivated to do their best. They feel that firm management values their contributions and looks for ways to help them achieve balance in their lives, so they can focus on work when they are at work. They see that firm management cares about them and their careers, providing opportunities for ongoing professional development, as well as equitable salaries and benefits.

The Saratoga Institute, a human resources management consulting firm, cites several key qualities that make an organization "a good place to live and work." Among them:

- employee opportunities for career growth;
- emphasis on work/life balance;
- employee/employment principles such as self-esteem and responsibility;
- competitive compensation and benefits;
- strong leadership;
- excellent communication;
- flexible work environment;
- organizational culture that values learning and caring; and
- focus on organization-wide success.

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## SHORTCUT

Providing a work environment in which employees trust the people they work for, have pride in what they do and enjoy the people they work with ultimately increases employee satisfaction and productivity and improves a law firm's financial performance. Legal administrators can make changes in several key areas – including pay and benefits, professional development opportunities and focus on work/life balance – to make their firms great places to work.

By focusing on the aforementioned qualities, doing well by your employees ultimately means they will do well by the firm. According to the Great Places to Work Institute, fostering a supportive work environment has many rewards, including increased employee morale and retention, higher productivity and profits, enhanced client service and a renewed focus on innovation, creativity and risk taking that drives organizational success.

### WHAT MOTIVATES YOUR EMPLOYEES

To generate the organizational rewards that come with making your organization a great place to work, legal administrators and law firm managers must first understand what motivates employees. According to *The Manager's Desk Reference*, 99 percent of all employees are motivated by at least one of the following seven needs:

- **Achievement:** Employees have the opportunity to excel and produce significant results, set high standards and do challenging work.
- **Power:** Employees are in positions to control their work and shape the organization's future.
- **Affiliation:** Employees identify with and are recognized as belonging to a specific organization where they can develop close personal relationships or friendships.
- **Autonomy:** Employees can work without being told what to do or having to report back frequently.
- **Esteem:** Employees are in environments where work and interactions with colleagues make them feel competent and effective.
- **Safety and Security:** Employees are in situations where they know they are safe and their jobs are secure and reasonably compensated.
- **Equity:** Employees work in environments where everyone is treated fairly and where discrimination of any kind is not tolerated.

If their motivators are being met, employees ultimately will feel there is a good match between the things they value about work and their employers. Asking

about other ways to make the work environment "a great place to work" for each person also tells employees that firm management cares enough to ask.

The next step, of course, is to find ways to meet these motivators and each employee's needs. Many employers are hesitant about asking, assuming that employees will demand more money or request things that the firm cannot provide. In practice, though, employees are typically very reasonable and willing to compromise, leading to "win-win" situations.

The remainder of this article showcases areas and ideas in which law firms can make improvements that contribute to making their firms great places to work. Some require financial investments, but others require nothing but time and effort to achieve.

### CAREER/PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Because employees care about their jobs, consistently providing them with career advancement and professional development opportunities will only increase and enhance their commitment to your firm. Key steps:

- Work with each staff member to develop career plans.
- Provide training opportunities, either in-house or through outside vendors that match employee needs.
- Hire and promote excellent people, using effective job descriptions to evaluate potential employees.
- Provide mentoring from more experienced personnel to shorten the learning curve and to advise on orienting new individuals to the firm.
- Use assignment selection as a means to challenge employees. Give individuals opportunities to take ownership of their work.
- Create an evaluation system with specific factors tied to one's job description and career development plan, making clear the factors on which individuals will be evaluated.
- Provide coaching services for individuals who might need one-on-one assistance to further

## STANDARDS OF PERFORMANCE FOR SUPERVISORY ATTORNEYS

A key element to making your law firm an extraordinary place to work is cultivating high performance standards for attorneys in supervisory roles. Law firm managers and legal administrators should identify the following skills as vital for supervisory attorneys and promote improvements in these areas to enhance the working environment for everyone.

### SELF-MANAGEMENT SKILLS

- Organize work and manage multiple commitments.
- Manage time effectively.
- Work independently.
- Create and carry out a plan for personal professional development.
- Recognize personal working style strengths and weaknesses.
- Adapt to evolving responsibilities.

### WORK MANAGEMENT SKILLS

- Understand client needs and grasp overall demands of projects.
- Set goals and deadlines.
- Identify component tasks within larger projects.
- Assess subordinate personnel capabilities and identify cohesive team members.
- Delegate component tasks.
- Communicate goals, expectations and deadlines to all team members.
- Assist team members in resolving conflicts.
- Monitor each team member's progress and provide ongoing feedback on performance.
- Update all team members on changes or new tasks.
- Provide resources to subordinates.
- Communicate final outcomes and levels of client satisfaction.
- Discuss individual contributions with each team member.
- Identify successful and less successful strategies.

### PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SKILLS

- Develop positive working relationships with support staff.
- Seek information from staff on career and personal experiences and/or goals.
- Maintain an awareness of skill sets, knowledge and experience.
- Identify areas for developmental attention.
- Describe expectations for work or tasks assigned.
- Communicate which skills, behaviors and personal qualities you value.
- Provide guidance on how to improve performance.
- Assist subordinates in resolving interpersonal conflicts.
- Serve as a resource to answer questions and provide assistance.
- Assist staff in seeking out appropriate tasks that will make the best uses of their skills.
- Involve subordinates in decisions that affect them.

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develop interpersonal, supervisory and time-management skills, among others.

- Employ career counseling or transition services for individuals who may not fit well in your work environment, with the understanding that helping someone successfully transition from your firm to another employer is a continuation of professional development.

### STRONG LEADERSHIP AND SUPERVISION

*Fortune* magazine reports that employers who land on its list of "100 Best Companies to Work For" all have one constant – positive attitudes and behaviors among managers. According to the report, how management relates to employees makes all the difference in becoming a great place to work.

Consider the following suggestions to enhance leadership and managerial competencies in your firm:

- Articulate the firm's clear vision and mission to all employees. Having a unifying purpose builds pride and camaraderie.
- Demonstrate strong, visible leadership. Staff should feel a personal kinship with their leaders (such as administrators and managing partners). Too often, law firm leaders avoid extensive interaction with staff, and that is a mistake. Staff should feel as if leaders are accessible and that they want to hear their comments and suggestions. This reinforces collegiality and a sense of community among all stakeholders.
- Build and maintain trust. The Great Place to Work Institute describes great places to work using a combination of three factors: trust, pride and camaraderie, with trust being the most influential of the three. Trust means that staff can depend upon your word. In short, if promises are made, they will be fulfilled. Without a foundation of trust, building a "great place to work" is impossible.
- Make having well-trained supervisors a priority. Some law firm employees complain about the lack of supervisory skills among the lawyers for whom they work. Supervisory training for anyone in a people and process management role should be mandatory.
- Promote the best interests of your staff. Knowing that leadership is concerned about their well-being is another reason for staff to feel good about their workplace. Create policies that enhance the welfare of staff, as well as showing

appreciation and genuine concern for each and every staff member. When training supervisors, emphasize giving praise and recognition to the other employees.

- Find out what motivates each staff member. By knowing what encourages each individual to do his or her best work, you not only create an environment where a person can be most productive, but also add to that person's satisfaction.
- Understand generational differences in supervising employees. A discussion of these differences should be included as part of the agenda for supervisor training.

### **SAFE AND POSITIVE WORK ENVIRONMENTS**

The working environment plays a tremendous role in increasing employee morale and motivation. Coming each day to a pleasant environment where everyone feels safe and positive engenders pride throughout the organization. What can you do to make your firm a more positive and safe environment? Consider these ideas:

- Make sure the premises are physically safe for all employees, as well as for anyone who may visit your office. Is it safe for those with physical challenges? Are parking lots and entrances well-lit? Do well-marked emergency exits exist? In addition, create and distribute to all employees an emergency plan in case a crisis situation emerges in your area.
- Establish and distribute a "No Harassment" policy to all employees, making clear that any form of abuse – physical, verbal or sexual – will not be tolerated. This includes bullying behavior, screaming and throwing of objects. Many individuals who exhibit abusive behaviors do not under-

stand that these behaviors are considered harassment. Train all firm staff in this area.

- Encourage diversity in hiring and your firm's policies. Consider establishing a diversity committee that is responsible for seeking ways to support minorities in your firm.
- Create systems and policies that are fair and transparent to make sure your firm is free from discrimination. All staff must be treated fairly.
- Make sure your office environment demonstrates a sense of pride. For example, are furnishings, equipment, carpeting or walls in need of repair or replacement? Are offices and workspaces well-lit to allow individuals to work under the best lighting conditions? Added touches, such as fresh flowers, can make your office space more welcoming.

### **EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

A communicative culture contributes significantly to staff satisfaction. Suggestions for establishing this type of culture include:

- Encourage listening. It sounds simple but, according to communication experts, most of us don't listen closely. Most communication issues would benefit greatly from individuals simply listening to what another person is saying, without comment, until the person has finished. Too often, people interrupt each other, thinking they already know what the other person is going to say, and nine times out of ten they're wrong! The act of listening improves most relationships immediately.
- Give immediate feedback, both positive and constructive. Waiting until evaluation time to give feedback usually does nothing to help an individual develop professionally. By encouraging immediate feedback, staff members can learn from

### **FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES**

In creating an environment that supports the integration of staff members' work and personal lives, consider instituting some of the following policies at your firm:

- parental leave;
- paternity leave;
- time off for emergencies;
- job sharing;
- working from home during normal working hours (at least occasionally);
- ability to change from full-time to part-time status;
- workplace or other firm-sponsored child care;
- assistance with child-care costs; and
- flexible working hours.

their mistakes and develop needed skills.

- Share information regarding the firm's vision and its goals, progress and challenges. When information is shared, staff members will more fully engage in the workplace because they will feel more a part of it.
- Demonstrate a willingness to answer hard questions and accept suggestions. Regular question-and-answer sessions and staff meetings can enhance the firm's communicative environment.

### A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Creating a sense of community in your firm leads to a sense of belonging among staff that, in turn, leads to greater commitment and cooperation. Staff turnover decreases significantly when employees see themselves as having places in the firm and fitting in. Furthermore, levels of client service, productivity and profitability also increase. Some ideas to enhance your firm's sense of community include:

- Use teams for cases or projects so staff members and attorneys can work together.

- Designate space for a cafeteria (if your firm is large enough to warrant one) or coffee bar where staff can mingle.
- Organize social events (with and without significant others and children), such as holiday parties, spring picnics and wine tastings.
- Sponsor a once-a-week get-together, such as gathering for bagels in the morning, a free lunch or a Friday happy hour.
- Employ appropriate humor at work. It lightens the atmosphere and increases serotonin levels, allowing individuals to better handle stress.
- Pursue service projects for which everyone in the firm can come together to contribute to your community. Consider working on a Habitat for Humanity project, an ALA Community Challenge Weekend program or something similar where teamwork is important.

### BENEFITS AND PAY

While benefits and pay typically do not top the list of essential ingredients for a great place to work, they

remain very important to most staff members. Some tips to ensure your compensation and benefits are optimal include:

- Confirm that your firm is paying market salary to staff members in your area. If you are paying below market, consider giving raises to affected staff.
- Provide health, life and disability insurance.
- Set up an employee retirement plan.
- Create a parental/family leave policy.
- Provide domestic partner benefits.
- Offer a generous vacation and sick day package. Most people want more personal time, and many are willing to take less salary in exchange for more "flex days" – days they can use for vacation or illness.
- Consider merit and "end-of-year prosperity" bonuses to recognize your staff's contributions to the firm.
- Institute bonuses for individuals who refer someone hired by the firm.
- Provide tuition/training benefits.

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## WORK/LIFE BALANCE

Firms that offer greater flexibility and options in work arrangements retain satisfied and productive staff members. Helping your staff integrate their work and personal lives allows them to better focus on work and builds greater commitment to the firm. Ideas you can implement in this area include:

- Establish flexible work arrangements, including flextime, compressed work weeks and job sharing.
- Provide child-care backup in emergency situations.
- Make sure your firm has family-friendly policies. If it does not, investigate what policies would be most appreciated by your staff and look for ways to introduce those policies.
- Sponsor wellness programs, including exercise, time and stress management, and yoga and nutrition classes. Studies show that providing these types of classes decreases absenteeism and staff burnout.
- Make available concierge services that can take care of chores such as dry cleaning, getting tickets to cultural and sporting events, shopping for gifts and making restaurant and other reservations.
- If your office or building does not have a health club, arrange for discounted memberships at a nearby facility.
- Contract with an Employee Assistance Program to provide counseling and referrals to your employees on key issues, including alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence, family issues, mental health services, stress management and financial counseling. Many employees experience personal issues that impact their work lives. Providing them with a service through which they can obtain assistance may help them to alleviate serious situations and facilitate productive returns to their jobs.
- Staff members appreciate gifts of time. Consider establishing time off for shopping during the holidays and shortening the work weeks during quieter times, such as summer.

## MAKE IT HAPPEN

Law firm leaders who make extra efforts to meet employees' needs and create a culture where all employees feel valued for their contributions will ultimately be rewarded with greater service, productivity and profitability. Creating a great firm in which to work has no down side. From a business point of view, it

just makes sense. And, from the human perspective, having satisfied employees creates a more enjoyable work environment for everyone in the firm. ✨

### *about the author*

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## LEARN MORE

### ALA Resources

These titles are available through ALA's Web site, [www.alanet.org/bookstore](http://www.alanet.org/bookstore).

- *200 Ways to Make Your Law Firm an Extraordinary Place to Work*, edited by Sue Umbdenstock and Rosemary Shields
- *Making Work Work: A Leader's Guide to Creating an Extraordinary Organization*, by Scott Hunter
- *HR from the Heart: Inspiring Stories and Strategies for Building the People Side of Great Business*, by Libby Sartain and Martha I. Finney

The following articles are available in the *ALA Management Encyclopedia (ALAME)*, [www.alanet.org/alame](http://www.alanet.org/alame).

- "Make Your Firm a Great Place to Work" (a longer, more comprehensive version of this excerpted article in *Legal Management*)
- "Employee Morale and Motivation"

The following are accessible via ALA's Legal Management Resource Center, <http://thesource.alanet.org>.

- "A Great Place to Work: What Makes Some Employers So Good – and Most So Bad?" by Robert Levering – Type keywords "great place" in the search engine
- "How to Make Your Firm a Great Place to Work," by Susan Raridon Lambreth and Kelly A. Fox – Type keywords "great place" in the search engine
- "Inexpensive Ways to Make Your Company Famous," by John Sullivan – Type keywords "great place" in the search engine

### On the Shelf

The following titles are available for purchase or download through many online retailers, including [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

- *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*, by Jim Collins
- *How to Become a Great Boss: The Rules for Getting and Keeping the Best Employees*, by Jeffrey J. Fox