

# Got Talent?

Learn How to Keep  
Good Employees



With a comprehensive understanding of their firms' resources and an assessment of current and future office needs, legal administrators can be pivotal in initiating or substantially improving retention of talented personnel.

BY CHARLES A. VOLKERT, ESQ.

When recruiting attorneys and other legal staff, law firm professionals typically put a great deal of effort into the process. Hiring committees determine the qualifications desired in a candidate, scrutinize résumés, call the best applicants in for extensive interviews and perform background checks before making a final selection. But, as critical as the recruitment process is, it's only the first step in building a strong, committed staff. Unless the individual needs of talented professionals are addressed continually after they're on board, these individuals are not likely to be long-term employees of the firm.

Not surprisingly, people who are qualified to work in the often high-pressure environment of a law office expect a great deal of themselves and their employers. Failure to recognize employees' abilities and contributions, help them to succeed or provide them with options for flexibility can be costly. For example, research by the Project for Attorney Retention shows that replacing second-year associates can cost a law firm up to \$500,000. Meanwhile, high attrition rates among new associates can multiply the financial impact and jeopardize the morale of those who remain.

Of course, lawyers are not the only professionals on whose talents firms depend. Losing a seasoned technology manager or legal administrator can disrupt an entire firm as it struggles to find a suitable replacement.

## SHORTCUT

Legal administrators are key players in the design and implementation of effective talent retention plans in their firms. Using their comprehensive understanding of firm operations and staffing needs, administrators can substantially improve their employers' talent retention efforts.

One reason that many associates leave law firms may be a perception that their employers are not serious about providing them with the guidance and support they need to grow in the profession. In the 2006 Associates Survey by *The American Lawyer*, attorneys were asked if their firms were communicating what it takes to make partner. Their responses averaged a lukewarm 3 on a scale of 1 to 5. According to the same survey, 55 percent of mid-level associates said they did not necessarily expect to be working in a law firm in five years.

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### NEW RETENTION CHALLENGES

The retention issue is becoming more complex for U.S. law firms because of demographic shifts in the overall population and the resulting changes in the legal workforce's composition. The presence of four generations in the workplace and the growing number of women and minorities in the profession require a reassessment of current retention efforts. The net effect of these shifts is the emergence of a group of employees who have needs and expectations that may not be currently addressed.

In some cases, for example, a perceived lack of advancement opportunities for female legal professionals has led to attrition. Administrators can help by encouraging their firms to acknowledge the unique concerns of *all* employees and enhance benefits and work environment policies in response.

Although law offices lack one simple formula to use in addressing employee retention, several fundamental factors should be considered in developing a talent retention strategy. Some are obvious, such as compensation and benefits packages, bonuses and vacation time. Just as important, however, but sometimes overlooked, are other factors, such as educational opportunities, flexible schedules, expanded responsibilities and advancement potential, regular and constructive feedback and the ability to balance life and career. Even among firms that offer a variety of incentives and benefits, if not properly understood and utilized by employees, those benefits do little to increase job satisfaction or retain valuable talent.

### COMPENSATION COUNTS

Competitive salaries are generally the first and most prominent incentives that firms offer to promote long-term loyalty. Compensation in all its forms – including bonuses, retirement plans, insurance and other benefits – is indeed important. In fact, among

## VITAL RESEARCH ON TALENT RETENTION



This feature article is based on "Future Law Office: The Changing Face of the Legal Industry," an ongoing research project by Robert Half Legal that examines key trends and developments in the legal profession. As part of the Future Law Office project,

Robert Half Legal interviewed numerous professionals in the legal and technology fields – including experts in emerging technologies, legal marketing and management – as well as its own staffing specialists throughout North America. The findings also are based on extensive research from national and state legal publications, legal trade associations and the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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Online seminars and training programs make learning more individualized and convenient. By subscribing to these services or making them available onsite, a regular infusion of up-to-date information can keep professionals' skill sets sharp.

attorneys at 300 firms and corporate legal departments surveyed by Robert Half Legal, 38 percent indicated that compensation provided their primary incentives for remaining with their employers.

Still, competitive salaries are not the sole, or even primary, consideration for many people working in the legal field. Many of the factors that build satisfaction and loyalty may be enhanced by adjusting organiza-

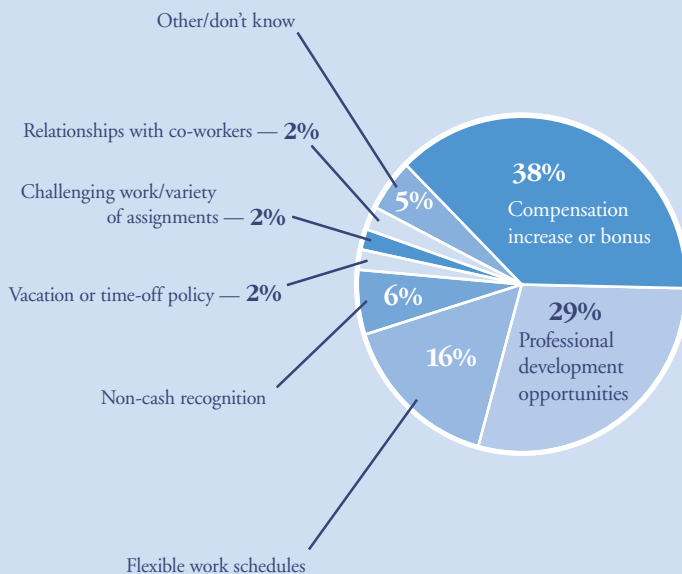
tional priorities and policies, rather than by making large financial outlays. According to the Robert Half Legal survey, professional development opportunities and flexible work schedules are among several considerations for legal professionals wanting to stay in the field. (See chart below for more details.)

#### RENEWED FOCUS ON EDUCATION

The legal profession typically attracts professionals, para-professionals, administrators and support staff who already have significant skills and high levels of motivation. These are largely individuals who place a great value on education, training and career development and who expect to be active learners throughout their lives.

After a competitive compensation package, the ability to learn and develop through their work is the second-most-frequently-cited basis for workplace satisfaction. Conversely, a lack of adequate training opportunities is a major complaint among employees in many businesses. Although law firms often have better reputations for providing quality training than some other types of businesses, firm leaders must bear in mind the high priority that legal professionals at all levels place on training and education. Mandatory continuing legal education (CLE) courses are typically reimbursed by many firms, which can often obtain volume discounts for their attorneys and paralegals. In states that permit law firms to produce their own continuing education programs, it has become a common practice for attorneys, paralegals, administrators and others to contribute to the development and presentation of these initiatives. This in-house collaboration gives less-tenured practitioners and well-experienced professionals a chance to work together, share information, get feedback and learn more than they could by simply attending a formal presentation of the same material.

Lawyers were asked, "In your opinion, which one of the following provides the best incentive for legal professionals to remain with a law firm or corporate legal department?" Their responses:



Source: Survey of 300 lawyers from among the largest law firms and corporations in the United States and Canada. The survey was commissioned by Robert Half Legal and conducted by an independent research firm.

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Other educational and training opportunities that go beyond CLE are frequently welcomed by legal professionals and support staff. New graduates and recent hires with little prior experience are among those who most need and appreciate a supportive education policy. Although firms normally provide an initial orientation to office procedures, software applications and equipment, a more formal training program can help new staff get up to speed quickly and avoid the delays and frustrations associated with learning “on the fly.”

Engaging professional trainers and instructors to conduct on-site learning programs can ultimately save firms time and money, particularly when new software, record-keeping procedures or other processes are implemented. Online seminars and training programs make learning more individualized and convenient. By subscribing to these services or making them available onsite, a regular infusion of up-to-date information can keep professionals’ skill sets sharp and satisfy their desires for ongoing educational opportunities for relatively small financial investments. Firms also can help staff pursue coursework by offering additional time off or administrative leave to attend classes that are scheduled during business hours.

Lawyers working with corporate clients are often eager to expand their expertise into newly developing areas of law, technology, business, management and administration. Although it is possible to pick up insights through on-the-job-experience or self learning, here again, a more formalized approach can yield faster and more thorough results.

Many firms offer tuition reimbursement programs for selected studies, such as MBA and finance degrees. Others provide up-front payment of tuition and fees. To tailor and expedite formal degree training, some firms have gone so far as to enter into partnerships with local colleges and universities to develop programs that provide the courses and scheduling considerations that working adults often need.

#### **A MATTER OF BALANCE**

Efforts to help top legal professionals achieve a stronger balance between the demands of work and personal life significantly affect a law office’s success in retaining them. Work-life balance issues

were long thought to be primarily a concern of working mothers, but they are now taken more seriously by men and women of all ages.

Professionals facing tight schedules and long commutes seek flexible working hours, and savvy firms are trying to accommodate them whenever feasible. As long as key functions can be adequately covered during business hours, many stresses caused by rush-hour delays and scheduling conflicts with child-care providers or other obligations can be reduced by alternate working arrangements.

The ability to move to a part-time schedule, whether on a temporary or permanent basis, can provide a strong incentive for those approaching retirement to stay at least long enough to ensure healthy transfers of their duties to others.

Telecommuting can also be an option. Though “face time” is an important part of client interaction for lawyers, some positions and areas of responsibility can be handled on an occasional telecommuting basis, especially for staff whose daily physical presence at the office may not be essential.

#### **MENTORS AND PEER ASSISTANCE**

Providing mentoring opportunities is another way to develop management and administrative skills while enhancing the mentor’s training techniques. Though it’s a long-established practice for attorneys in law firms, mentoring has not always been extended to other staff members. And even among attorneys, much attention may be given to honing legal skills, but little to gaining business savvy or client development, skills that are essential for associates on the partnership track. By helping to locate appropriate senior mentoring partners for talented associates, legal assistants and support employees, administrators allow these individuals to develop their strengths more rapidly.

Colleague support should also be addressed. Those who are engaged in similar work can gain a lot of immediately useful knowledge by sharing information with their peers. A formal peer-support network can assist in building a knowledge-sharing culture while giving staff a quick means of getting assistance when stymied by a new assignment. Such networks can be used to spot frequently encountered difficulties that need to be addressed more fully.

## ROOM TO GROW

The structure of law firm hierarchies can be rigid and narrow. Young attorneys may see little likelihood of achieving full partner status, and non-attorneys may see even less opportunity for promotion. Although this pyramidal structure is unlikely to change soon, adjustments are already being made or planned at some firms. Rather than losing talent in the “partnership-or-out” sweepstakes, firms see that flexibility permitting the retention of associate attorneys in various specialized roles can provide a release valve for the pressures that may cause the most valuable players from deserting as soon competing firms make offers.

Legal support staff may feel that they have even less potential for growth than attorneys. This sense of performing the same old routine can undermine efforts at encouraging leadership qualities among those with non-legal positions. Providing opportunities to lead projects or teams gives staff members chances to gain communication, managerial and administrative skills. These projects can also reveal strengths and assets that may have gone unnoticed previously.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF RECOGNITION

All talented professionals, including even the most accomplished attorneys, want to be appreciated for

contributions to their organizations. While well-argued cases and winning briefs usually garner appreciative feedback, more subtle achievements may go unrecognized. For example, a receptionist who adroitly handles a difficult client has performed a critical service. So has the technology manager who implements a successful data security system. These accomplishments by non-attorneys need to be recognized as openly as those of lawyers.

Every employee in a law firm represents a significant investment of time and money. But unlike an organization’s products, factories or systems, an investment in talent is a working investment in human resources that requires an ongoing commitment by all parties. Legal administrators who help their firms to create supportive work environments can directly affect the morale and loyalty of their organizations’ most important assets – their employees. ✱

### *about the author*

**Charles A. Volkert, Esq.**, is Executive Director of Robert Half Legal, a staffing service specializing in the placement of attorneys, paralegals, legal administrators and other legal professionals with law firms and corporate legal departments. For more information, visit [www.roberthalflegal.com](http://www.roberthalflegal.com).

## LEARNMORE

### ALA Resources

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

- *Finding and Keeping Great Employees*, by Jim Harris and Joan Brannick
- *Keeping Good Lawyers: Best Practices to Create Career Satisfaction*, by M. Diane Vogt and Lori-Ann Rickard

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

- “The Importance of Recruitment and Retention for Associates and Staff”
- “Employees – Who Needs Them”

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

- “Focus on the Two Rs, Recruiting & Retention,” by Shannon O’Brien – Type keywords “**employee retention**” in the search engine

### On the Web

- *HR Magazine*, “HR How-to: Employee Retention” – [www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m3495/is\\_7\\_49/ai\\_n6134982](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3495/is_7_49/ai_n6134982)
- *HR Magazine*, “Managing Employee Retention: A Strategic Accountability Approach” – [www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m3495/is\\_7\\_50/ai\\_n14811578](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3495/is_7_50/ai_n14811578)

### On the Shelf

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

- *The Employee Recruitment and Retention Handbook*, by Diane Arthur
- *Keeping Your Valuable Employees: Retention Strategies for Your Organization’s Most Important Resource*, by Suzanne Dibble