

Simple Truths About Developing and Retaining Today's Young Associates

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You don't have to be told that this generation of associates is different. Their priorities and perspectives are different. They are motivated differently. Money is important but life style issues are more critical to them. They have more choices than the generations before them and therefore more leverage. If their work culture and circumstance proves less than ideal or different than originally promised, they will move to another place where they feel its just right. They are not afraid to move from circumstance to circumstance, either as a means of achieving professional advancement or that "perfect" work culture.

At the same time, don't be fooled into thinking that they are a generation of "slackers." They welcome challenge and responsibility. They want to know where the firm is going, how its going to get there, and what role they will play. They want a clear explanation of firm expectations and what it takes to move to the next "rung." They don't like criticism, but welcome constructive critique. They are technologically savvy and not easily intimidated.

The high cost of associate turnover to a firm has been well documented. It has been estimated to be as much as three times the salary of the departing associate before a replacement associate can ramp up to maximum productivity. It becomes important to review and implement certain "simple truths" about developing and retaining this new generation of attorneys in order to minimize these types of additional costs, and to perpetuate the firm as a viable business.

Below is a list of some of these "simple truths."

1. Make sure salaries and benefits are, at the very least, market competitive - if not, they will either know or find out shortly. While life style is a priority, money is still important and is seen as a measure of value. If paid less than market they will feel undervalued and eventually they will leave for a place where they do feel properly valued.
2. Communicate the firm's mission, short and long term strategies and the part they will be playing in these plans - This gives the associate a secure feeling that the firm has vision, direction, leadership and a sense of where all the "moving parts" belong.
3. Provide a clear explanation of firm expectations relative to billable hours, fees originated (if applicable), involvement if firm activities, community and professional involvement, professional conduct, etc. Additionally, provide a concise explanation of how and how often associates are evaluated - This allows the associate a fair chance to measure the opportunity you are providing him/her. It also provides the firm with fair criteria and timetable for evaluation.
4. Tell the associate in a simple, clear, direct manner what would make them more valuable to the firm - This type of constructive information gives the associate of today the kind of direct input that they easily understand. It also provides to them a roadmap for becoming valuable in the overall strategy of the firm. This is the type of information which will help make the associate feel secure that they are seen as a long term "player" in the firm.

5. Provide a clear explanation of the "path to partnership," including credentials required, levels of achievement needed, timetables, etc. - Everyone wants to know that there is opportunity to advance and what it takes to move upward. Generation X is no different in this regard.
6. Foster a firm culture which encourages feedback that builds performance rather than stifles it - Consider, depending on firm size, having the position of full-time or part-time Director of Associate Development.
7. Make sure that each associate has a "Dutch Uncle" - This is either a partner or senior associate that they can view as an advocate. This provides them someone to go to with simple questions without the fear of being judged.
8. In addition to the above consider committing to a structured mentoring program - This will help the associates to set achievable goals and will provide assistance in developing a plan to achieve those goals. A few years ago, an internet chat group surfaced known as the Greedy Associates Club. What bound this group together were feelings of being undervalued, and stifled creatively. It has been said that the Greedy Associates movement was a direct result of the breakdown of the mentoring relationship in so many firms.
9. Provide learning sessions for developing skills not taught in law school - These skills will be of great value to both the individual and the firm. Examples include: how to read and interpret a simple set of financial statements; how to ask questions and how to listen; advocacy skills; and writing skills.
10. Promote participation in activities "outside of the firm" - Both professionally (bar associations, young lawyers groups, etc.) and community (civic and charitable organizations). This allows the associates to experience their value outside of their roles as attorneys and allows for a broader perspective.
11. Consider adopting some "out of the box" benefits such as: individual "Sabbaticals" to be taken at certain intervals based on defined eligibility requirements; "Q Time" which is time earned by associates for exceeding billable hours targets and can be redeemed for additional vacation or a combination of cash and vacation; Employee Assistance Programs which may offer personal financial services, child care referrals, health information, life event planning, etc.; and Restructured formal office hours in the summer. - Offering these types of unusual benefits not only addresses the priorities of today's associate but also fosters a firm culture which differentiates your firm from your competition and promotes your firm as the desired firm of choice.

Associate development and retention are matters significant to the long-term success of today's law firm. By considering all or even some of the "truths" suggested above you will set your firm apart as being responsive to the critical issues of today's generation of young associates. This will enhance your chances for success with regards to the issue of development and retention.