

HR Departments Crucial To Recruiting Success

*To be effective, human resources managers
need respect of firm partners*

By LYNN MESTEL



The legal industry, like most professional service firms, watches its most valuable asset go up and down the elevator at the beginning and end of each workday.

As a result, law firms need to be committed to hiring the best and brightest associates, laterals and senior counsels they can find, if they are to maintain their competitive edge in the marketplace.

The human resources department can and should be a valuable tool in this endeavor. But unfortunately, Rodney Dangerfield's famous line, "I get no respect, no respect at all," can be used to describe the dilemma facing many legal HR departments.

Often lacking in commitment and resources, the human resources managers at many law firms are not effectively utilized to their full extent. If the legal HR department is nothing more than a mechanism for sorting through resumes, managing benefits and payroll, rather than a strategic tool for seeking out the most talented recruits and growing the professionals within the firm, something is amiss.

The Firm's Gatekeeper

Recently, at a gathering of law firm leaders, I raised the question: Do you really know the people who run your HR departments? Do you ensure the HR department gets professional training and development? Is your human resources staff paid salaries competitive with the HR departments of investment banks or corporations?

It is helpful to remember that the HR department is the first place potential employees see. No firm will attract the best attorneys—no matter how much money it pays or how high its profitability level is—if a recruit is not impressed by their first exposure to it. We forget that the HR department is the gatekeeper and public face to a firm's ability to attract the best lateral attorneys.

I have seen many excellent candidates, after a negative experience with an untrained, inexperienced HR department, make an about-turn and walk out the door, even though they had no problem with rest of the firm. They did this because they believed the HR department wouldn't be in a position to help them grow their practice.

Recruiting, interviewing and deciding which lawyers to hire can be a long and arduous process. Overworked partners cram in interviews and sometimes are undecided on the right or appropriate timing for hiring new professionals.

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Helping Firms Through Tough Times

But by giving the HR department management responsibility, overworked partners can relieve themselves of that burden.

In that respect, HR managers should have a seat at the executive table so that they better understand the needs of their firms and can make suggestions on how, from a staffing perspective, the HR department can contribute towards achieving the firms' goals.

HR professionals also can be crucial in dealing with the challenges of a declining economy.

In the heyday of the e-commerce boom, Boston's first-year associates went from making \$90,000 in 1999 to upward of \$150,000 last year—and a \$35,000 raise for a second-year associate was not unheard of.

But after shelling out huge salaries and bonuses to attract and retain high performers, practice heads must now fight the dual battles of controlling costs, retaining talent and staying competitive in the marketplace. A trained HR professional understands these challenges, and will have ideas and solutions to help address them.

Creating An Effective HR Department

Using HR departments effectively means recharging them with respect and a sense of purpose. Commitment from the law firm's senior partners is key to keeping the HR department motivated and feeling that they can make a difference.

One way to demonstrate that commitment is to install a trained HR director and give that person management responsibility. Also, invest in people with college-level training in human resources management, at least at the leadership level of the firm's HR team. In addition, human resources personnel should attend continuing education classes, just like lawyers do.

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Firms also should explore a bonus system for HR officials that is based on their success in recruiting lateral associates. A good HR department is worth its weight in gold because it directly impacts the firm's overall success and ability to keep growing. Finally, senior partners need to show HR departments respect. After all, they are the front line in dealing with firms' staffing challenges.

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