

Communicating Staffing Changes and Finding Talent in Law Firms: Comings & Goings

Article By:

The National Law Review

The [Thomson Reuters Marketing Partner Forum](#) is a time for law firm leaders to learn from each other and learn about the newest developments in law firm marketing. This year, one of the breakout session is: Greener Pastures: Recalibrating Talent & Business Development Models Across the Firm with panelists [Richard J. Cohen, Founder & Managing Partner, Goldberg Segalla](#); [Patrick Fuller, Vice President, Legal, ALM Intelligence](#); [John Sterling, Chief Marketing Officer, Sterne, Kessler, Goldstein & Fox PLLC](#) and [Mary K. Young, Partner, Zeughauser Group LLC](#), moderated by [Mark Beese, President, Leadership for Lawyers LLC](#). This breakout dove into handling changes at the firm; specifically, attorney departures-- and how to communicate these changes internally as well as to firm clients, and how law firm culture can impact the hiring and recruitment process.

Communicating Departures: To the Law Firm, to the Client, and to the Public

One of the main discussions out of the panel was a discussion of how the firm reacts when a partner or practice group decides to depart the firm. The panelists agreed that a strategy should cover the public, internal firm staff, as well as a special outreach for firm clients, and incorporate the idea that departures happen for all kinds of reasons. It's not necessarily a bad thing.

That said, it still requires management. When the departure is imminent, it's crucial to inform key people right away, according to Mary K. Young, of Zeughauser Group. She says "Include the CMO and Communications Director so they can prepare for press and help craft an internal communications plan. Think through the talking points in advance; be honest, but tell a positive, supportive story." Mark Beese of Leadership for Lawyers, who moderated the panel, agrees, saying: "When you consider that firm's strategies and organizational structures, including compensation, are changing in response to the market, not everyone is going to be a good fit as these changes progress. So sometimes people and practice leave the firm. Firm leadership needs to communicate that despite the departure, the firm will continue its commitment to pursue its vision, is committed to client success and making the firm a great place to work."

Another element of this discussion is keeping an eye on other attorneys or staff members who were close to the departing lawyer to ensure one departure does not become two. Young says, "Internal messaging can help you manage the external fall out. Follow up regularly with people you want to retain; reassure them that the firm cares about them and wants them to stay, to discourage others

from leaving.” Young also says: “be gracious to and about departing attorneys. You never know, sometimes good people come back.”

Communicating with clients is crucial during these times of change, and a lot of prevention work can be done before any such need arises. The panel agreed that collaborating on behalf of clients and integrating their business into the firm--by addressing their business problems firm-wide and spreading out the relationship across multiple individuals can help inoculate the firm against disruption should someone pivotal leave. Beese points out: “Some firms have figured out that the best way to prevent large institutional clients from switching firms when a key partner leaves is to assure that there are multiple, deep contacts within the firm, raising the cost of changing counsel.” Young advises: “Reach out directly and at a high level with a continuity plan, explain who will be on the client’s team going forward and why they were chosen.”

When announcing the departure to the public, Young suggests “Keep statements simple and positive. Make sure your audience understands that sometimes people leave because another firm will be a better fit for their practice and their clients, without disparaging anyone.” John Sterling, of Sterne Kessler, agrees. He says: “It’s going to hit the media, be fast, be timely, be truthful.”

Law Firm Culture and Recruitment

Patrick Fuller of ALM Intelligence shared some data on how factors such as: slower economic growth, client pressure on pricing and rising competition for legal services are impacting the legal market and “Firms are looking at the lateral hiring market as a method to boost sluggish organic growth.” However, this approach comes with pitfalls, as successful partnerships need to be more than an exchange of a big book of business for a big payday. In this environment, understanding the interplay between law firm culture and recruitment is crucial for success in these areas. The panel agreed, knowing the firm’s culture and communicating it successfully to potential laterals and new hires was crucial to success, and this required all parties involved to look beyond the bottom line and the book of business. How the individual fits with the firm culture might be the one thing that leads to a long, successful partnership.

If an attorney doesn’t fit with the law firm culture, if the values don’t align, successful integration is unlikely and a long term, profitable relationship could be hard to attain. Young says, “The law firm’s culture and hiring/recruitment are inextricably linked. Firm cultures vary pretty dramatically so it is important recruits understand the culture. Fit with the culture should be a critical component in the hiring decision for both sides.”

In terms of attracting talent out of law school and other young professionals, Beese points out that Millennials are a big piece of this puzzle. Beese says, “Increasingly, firms will be recruiting not only on salary but more on factors like flexible schedules, meaningfulness of work, perceived brand of work culture and other less tangible factors than money.”

Richard J. Cohen, of Goldberg Segalla, indicates that when he does recruiting, he likes to focus on the attorney as a person. He says, “I like to take them out to breakfast or dinner, and see them with food on their face and get to know them as a human being. I’m looking for an attorney to be excellent at what he or she does, and a better human being than a lawyer. I’m trying to put together a firm that people enjoy, and don’t want to leave.”

Source URL: <https://natlawreview.com/article/communicating-staffing-changes-and-finding-talent-law-firms-comings-goings>