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BULLETIN

Successful Lateral Recruitment DEPENDS ON LATERAL INTEGRATION

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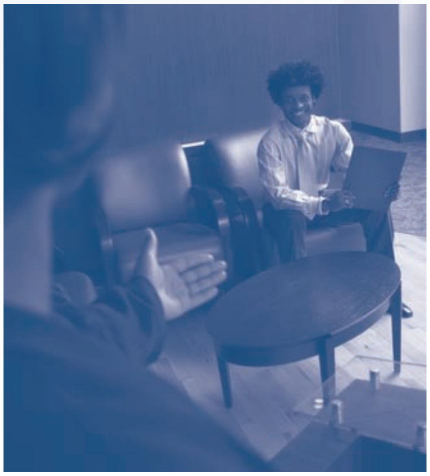
Over the past year, the law firm recruitment professionals I have spoken to around the country seem busier than ever. One of the responsibilities that has expanded greatly is lateral recruitment.



Firms are actively hiring experienced lawyers, both partners and associates – and at record numbers. On numerous occasions I have heard about firms that hired 50+ laterals in just the first half of 2007! The resources dedicated to these efforts are enormous in terms of lawyers' time spent interviewing and search firm fees. The question is: What can you as a recruitment professional do to help ensure that these new laterals are integrated successfully into your firm? This has become an important question not only for recruitment professionals but also for professional development administrators.

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To assess your lateral hiring success and determine possible areas for improvement, you can start by determining your lateral retention rate. Identify all laterals hired over the past two years and then look at how many are still with you today. For example, if you hired 20 laterals over the past two years and 15 of them are still with you, then you have a 75% retention rate – or, stated another way, 25% of the lateral hires have left (a 25% attrition rate).

You can get even more helpful information from this exercise if you then further examine which laterals are still with you. Specifically, what backgrounds in terms of firms, government agencies, clerkships, and schools do the laterals that are still with your firm have in common as compared to the ones who have left? During this analysis, you might notice that you are losing laterals from certain departments more frequently than from others. To help a department address its retention issues, you may want to make it a "pilot group" for a lateral integration initiative. Hopefully, the information you learned from this exercise can help you to identify what works for your firm

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and what you might want to tweak in terms of your lateral hiring and integration.

The laterals your firm has hired are a great source of information for your integration process. Ask them what resources and people were most helpful to them as they transitioned into your firm. You may want to send them a quick survey. Some possible questions could be:

- What resources did you find most helpful in your first 30 days with the firm?
- To whom did you go with questions about how things get done here?
- What do you still remember from your initial training/orientation that has helped you work here?
- What do you wish you knew from the beginning that has helped you integrate into our culture?
- What advice would you give to a new lateral joining our firm?

This exercise can also be done in person through brief one-on-one interviews with your lateral hires. Their feedback and suggestions can help you to develop or expand your current lateral integration program.

In preparation for this article, I interviewed recruitment professionals to get their proven suggestions for a successful lateral integration program. Here are some of the highlights of their lateral integration programs.

Jennifer Queen, Director of Hiring and Professional Development for McKenna Long & Aldridge, is in the process of rolling out a formal integration program for new lateral associates. She says, "We have created a checklist for the lateral's first 90 days that will be implemented by the recruitment manager." One of the goals of this lateral integration initiative is to connect laterals with attorneys at the firm based on personal interests, hobbies, and other similarities beyond practice group specialty and level of seniority. For example, she recently orchestrated a lunch between a new lateral and an attorney at her firm whose children are the same age. "When I learned that the new lateral had a five-month-old," she says, "I thought he could benefit from meeting another attorney who has a child the same age who could assist him in finding out about resources in Atlanta that could be helpful to the family as they settle into a new city." With this new integration process, the recruitment manager checks in frequently with the new lateral to make sure that any questions that arise are answered and that the lateral has the resources he or she needs to feel integrated and valuable.

Ari Katz is the National Director of Lateral Recruitment at Bingham. His advice about partner integration is to start the moment it is announced that a new partner will be joining your firm. At Bingham, prior to the partner's first day, PR-related materials are prepared including biography, client lists, and pictures. The goal is to make the partner feel welcome and help facilitate the cross-selling process. Katz says, "Everything has to be done by the first day so that we are ready to launch and showcase our newest partner addition. We want to make sure that this new partner's information is on our website day one." Bingham's well-developed plan continues throughout the lateral partner's first year. For example, the firm identifies specific lawyers this new partner should meet to cross-sell practices and schedules face-to-face meetings. These meetings take place across the firm and are aimed at helping new partners market themselves internally to their new colleagues and leverage their practice. Bingham also has an annual lateral partner retreat that is hosted by the firm's chairman, Jay Zimmerman.

Mintz Levin has their recruiting, professional development, and human resources staff all work as a team to achieve successful lateral integration. Mentoring programs are available for all new lateral associates. Junior laterals are assigned mentors upon arriving at the firm, and these mentors may be from outside the lateral's practice area. This mentorship lasts for the associate's first three years and is aimed at cultural integration. Fourth-year lateral associates and beyond are assigned a partner advisor from their department who helps the lateral focus on career development. In addition, Mintz Levin has a Practice Group Administrator in the largest practice groups who is charged with making sure that the new lateral is integrated into the practice by means of work assignments and client exposure.

Heather Kelly, Manager of Legal Professional Development at Mintz Levin, stresses how training programs can contribute to lateral integration. Kelly says, "Our firm offers over 125 training programs annually to all attorneys. We see this as an opportunity for the lateral to network with attorneys inside and outside their practice and their office." Mintz's lateral hires (as well as all other attorneys) are expected to attend at least 12 hours of classes annually. One of the courses offered to all laterals is entitled "Expectations," which is aimed at helping laterals to better understand the firm's culture and giving them the tools needed to thrive in the practice.

Dani Barnard, Director of Legal Recruiting at Mintz, focuses on partner hiring and integration. She considers regular follow-up with lateral partners crucial to a successful transition. She says, "After a lateral partner has been at the firm for four to five weeks, the Director of Human Resources and I have a face-to-face meeting with the lateral. We take this time to discuss the integration process with them and evaluate how things are going, which helps us determine what else the firm can do to help ensure a successful transition." According to Barnard, what she hears most frequently during these meetings is that "the laterals appreciate that someone has been there for them 24/7 since their arrival."

As you focus on lateral integration at your firm, you can help your new lateral associate or partner by both providing them with resources to help them transition into your practice and by connecting them with various people who will help them transition into your unique culture. It is important to remember that just because they have practiced before does not mean they know how to practice at your firm. A move to a new firm requires support on many levels.

Here is a 30-day checklist with some possible action steps you can use to start or expand your firm's lateral integration program:

PRE-ARRIVAL:

- Have two lawyers who interviewed the lateral call to congratulate him or her on accepting the firm's offer.
- Have one partner from the department the lateral will be joining take the lateral to lunch or dinner. (This partner can invite anyone he or she chooses, including significant others.)
- Collaborate with your marketing department to make sure all the materials are ready to announce the lateral's arrival on day one (e.g., bio, press release, client list, etc.).

FIRST DAY AND WEEK:

- Send out communications internally and externally announcing the new lateral.
- Identify a firm leader (e.g., managing partner or practice group head) to welcome the lateral in person.
- Schedule lunches for the lateral for everyday of his or her first week with a mix of associates and partners from inside and outside the lateral's practice area. (Make sure one of these lawyers is also a lateral hire.)
- Assign a formal or informal mentor or advisor to the lateral.
- Host a welcome reception for the new lateral.
- Check in with the lateral at the end of his or her first week to see how the transition to your firm is going so far.

FIRST 30 DAYS:

- Schedule face-to-face meetings with lawyers in your firm but outside your office to meet with this lateral.
- Have heads of your associates, diversity, pro bono, and other firm committees meet with the new lateral.
- Designate a point person who meets weekly with the lateral to touch base and ensure that the integration is going smoothly. ■