

## Solicitor Training and Support: Your Most Valuable Asset

All professional service firms maintain that their people are their greatest asset, and many include outstanding working conditions in their mission statements. However, a reduced focus on solicitor training in non-technical areas, increasing levels of staff turnover and a trend of lateral hiring demonstrates that in many cases this does not ring true. The 'war for talent' also highlights that there is a lack of sufficiently qualified young lawyers, and that firms wanting to succeed in the future must take the issue seriously and find ways of minimising turnover.

### The Attraction of Small Business Law Firms

Smaller and medium-sized firms cannot offer the attractive remuneration packages that the larger city firms can, but they do hold significant advantages. Again, it is a case of differentiation. Small business law firms must emphasise opportunities for flexible working patterns, a structured career path, a more specialised or more varied workload, and more face-to-face client interaction. They must be able to demonstrate that their firm has a distinctive culture of excellence and really cares for its people.

### Involvement

If employer claims are to ring true, and resonate on to clients, then it is of vital importance to get 'buy in' from staff at all levels. This starts with the ethos that the firm is a 'team', from cleaners through to equity partners and management, and everyone is to be treated as an important player in the team. Therefore, staff must be involved in defining the firm's direction, communication maintained at all levels and regular information provided about the firm's performance. Profit-sharing, even in basic roles, is an effective way of demonstrating commitment to these principles, and management must be allowed to be consistently challenged, and a dialogue maintained. Anonymous staff feedback forms are part of this, but coffee mornings with the Managing or Senior Partner for feedback are a better way of achieving genuine involvement. Offering free services to staff, such as document authentication, add to the sense that they are valued. Moreover, a rewards system for bringing in clients and referrals underlines the ethos that the firm and the staff share goals and priorities.

### Recruitment

This ethos must be apparent not only to current staff, but also to all new applicants and recruits. Any firm taking this issue seriously will have a dedicated 'Careers' section on their website, outlining how they provide a different and caring working environment. Recruits are interested in more than money, and this should be reflected in the firm's recruitment material. Interviews are an opportunity not just to assess the candidate, but to demonstrate the firm's ethos and community. All new recruits should be introduced to other staff, including the Managing or Senior Partner, and given a full tour of all of the firm's local offices.

## Solicitor Training

Training and support are areas in which many firms do not live up to their own highly professed standards. Smaller firms often concentrate resources on technical training, while giving insufficient attention to training for management roles and 'soft' skills. Good lawyers do not automatically make good managers, and personal development is an important element in retaining staff. Information should be obtained about staff's interests and additional skills, and efforts made to support them in developing these. Outstanding firms view Continuing Professional Development as an important part of a fee earner's role, not as an onerous requirement. Staff must also be trained in confidentiality standards and good practice, client care and telephone skills, IT and firm processes, and in how to deal with new enquiries.

## Support

Likewise, fee-earning staff often feel that they are insufficiently supported to carry out their roles to the standards they expect of themselves. In less prosperous times, staff in support roles are often the first to go, but this is unlikely to keep the fee-earners happy. Ensuring that fee-earners are supported by the staff and technology they need is key to maintaining excellence as a firm. If a firm must streamline, it must do so by cutting back in unprofitable areas and retaining a reputation for outstanding technical work and client service in its remaining services. It is often the case that flexible working arrangements, including flexible contracts for support staff and outsourcing areas such as IT that do not need to be kept in-house, can provide the most effective way of supporting staff.



Please feel free to [contact me](#) for further advice.

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