

Different Styles of Law Firm Recruiting

When it comes to recruiting, law firms get as much out of their efforts as they put into them. As a result, is it a surprise to hear partners complain that their firms are not attracting as much top talent as they once did.

The current reality is that fewer law firm leaders or rainmaking partners make the time to participate in recruitment efforts. Although senior partners can remember the days when marquee partners came to their law school campuses to recruit, most high profile partners today are too busy managing important client relationships to market their star status on law school campuses.

Law firms need to recognize that this choice negatively impacts their ability to hire the best talent. When firms send a [senior associate](#) or a first-year partner instead of a leading, senior partner to a recruiting event, they give applicants the impression that their firm does not take recruiting star talent seriously. This, in turn, causes prospective hires to question how much personalized attention the firm will invest in their professional growth and development. It also begs the question, when it comes to recruiting, whose job is it anyway?

When law firms get large enough, they delegate their recruiting efforts to administrators who plan and organize events as well as develop important relationships with law school faculty members and [career services](#) center personnel. Unfortunately, the administrators' ability to make an impact is undercut when star partners don't show up at recruiting events. When this happens, a second choice replacement is sent to represent the firm. While any presence is better than none at all, recruiting efforts that don't include senior or high profile partners will not help a firm win the war for talent.

At large firms, highly successful partners have forgotten how significant their presence can be at an alumni gathering or a campus recruiting event. On a number of occasions, we have interviewed associates or partners who explained that the reason they chose to work at a particular firm was often influenced by the quality of attention they received during the recruiting process. Time after time, these people measured this quality by the seniority and prominence of the partners who invested time to get to know them during recruiting.

In our work, we have identified three different approaches to how law firms manage the recruitment of legal talent. We classify them as transactional, intentional, and strategic. In each case, clearly defined characteristics have emerged.

Transactional Approach

Many firms take a transactional approach to recruiting. We define this as a short-term, quick-fix program that is designed to meet the immediate needs of the firm or a particular practice group. Transactional approaches consist of discrete recruiting activities that are coordinated not with a significant amount of foresight or planning but, instead, arising to satisfy an immediate need. Because transactional approaches are short-lived, they make no real lasting impression on anyone either internally or externally.

Some transactional recruiting approaches are driven by a handful of partners and associates who decide to take matters into their own hands rather than coordinate efforts and build consensus with other members in the firm. An administrator manages other forms of transactional recruiting approaches and works either part-time or full-time on the effort. In either case, roles and responsibilities are often unclear and recruiting tracking systems and team processes are either ad hoc or nonexistent.

On the one hand, transactional approaches can be effective because the goals are modest and they are

given priority status. On the other hand, they are highly inefficient because they are created from scratch and little effort is made to institutionalize best practices or to preserve lessons learned. As a result, transactional approaches are not capable of sustaining a high quality of service over a prolonged period of time. Instead, because individual champions or small groups lead transactional recruiting approaches, they last only as long as the need is real and apparent. Once the goal is achieved, the leader or group of volunteers disbands.

The Intentional Approach

Perhaps a majority of firms has learned to create intentional recruiting systems and processes. Intentional recruiting approaches are typically designed to meet growth goals and may include firmwide communications efforts, law school target lists, and talent profiles of ideal candidates who would be the right "fit" at the firm. At the very least, intentional recruiting efforts are organized by a part-time or full-time administrator working with partner and associate members of a recruiting committee. The administrator keeps records and coordinates volunteers to represent the firm at multiple campuses and recruiting events.

Firms taking an intentional approach have hired experienced professional development directors to manage and supervise the efforts. These directors work with firm leaders to clarify recruitment needs and attempt to align a recruiting strategy with the firm's growth strategy. This approach requires support and discipline from firm leaders. If successful, intentional recruiting efforts can make a noticeable contribution to the firm's success; if the right talent is identified and hired in the first place, fewer associates will leave as a result of unmet expectations. This, in turn, creates a more stable work environment and alleviates much of the stress and frustration caused by mismanaging human resources.

And the Strategic Approach

We call the most powerful type of recruiting approach strategic. Strategic recruiting efforts can only be found at firms where senior leaders have wholeheartedly decided to make recruitment a top management priority. With visible senior support, strategic efforts thrive and improve continuously. Recruiting program performance measures are designed and tracked over time, creative communications campaigns are generated, and the vast majority of the firm's professionals participates in the process. As in the intentional recruiting approach, strategic efforts are driven by experienced professional development directors and recruiting managers who have a team of part-time or full-time employees who compile and analyze recruitment data, develop communication strategies, and enjoy firmwide respect for their significant, if indirect, contribution to the firm's bottom line.

A strategic recruiting approach is both methodical and considered. It requires careful study of every facet of the recruiting process to identify and make improvements to current systems and processes. It also requires demographic analysis of talent pools to determine how to appeal to the needs and desires of younger lawyers. The best strategic recruiting approaches anticipate new market trends, identify what kind of talent will be required to meet growing client demands, and remain ahead of the competition. However, strategic recruiting approaches are the most difficult to sustain because they demand exceeding expectations on a continual basis.

Improving Your Recruiting

While it is difficult to do, an increasing number of law firms are successfully making recruiting a top management priority. Regardless of how your firm's approach might be categorized, it is likely that there is an opportunity to manage your firm's current recruiting efforts even better. Here are six ideas:

The firm's executive committee has to make recruiting a top management priority. Without this level of support, it is impossible to grow beyond an intentional recruiting approach.

Develop a recruitment plan that includes goals, criteria for success, team member roles and responsibilities, clear processes and procedures, meaningful incentives and rewards, a realistic timeline with important deadlines or milestones, and a financial resources commitment.

Assemble a highly motivated cross-functional recruiting team that includes administrators, associates,

partners, firm leaders, and members of the executive committee.

Develop and implement an internal communications plan that helps to change the traditional perception of recruiting at the firm. This will require senior firm leaders to serve as both high-profile communicators and role models, in order to generate the necessary level of attention and support for the effort.

Treat a certain number of the hours devoted to recruiting efforts as equally important to billable hours.

Ensure that the firm uses creative technology solutions to streamline the recruiting process, but not at the expense of losing the personal "touch" required to make a good impression on a new candidate.

In the final analysis, law firms need to recognize that recruiting cannot be treated as a short-term, transactional initiative. These kinds of efforts are inefficient and they make no lasting contribution to the firm or to prospective candidates. Instead, firms need to make recruiting a long-term, strategic priority. The benefits of a strategic approach will not be immediately recognizable. However, over time they will lay a solid foundation on which to build future success.

Interested in Learning More About Legal Hiring? Read the Definitive Guide:

[How to Hire a Legal Recruiter for Your Law Firm: How Law Firms Recruit Attorneys Using Legal Recruiters](#)