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## Five Areas of Focus for Law Firms to Boost Employee Engagement

By Sandra Fleischman

In light of the characteristics of the typical law firm environment – long hours, demanding, fast-paced, and deadline-driven – preventing burnout and keeping attorneys and support staff energized, motivated and engaged are key to a law firm's success. Adding to the motivation challenge is the natural disparity between attorneys and support staff. Irrespective of working conditions or perceptions, one thing we know for sure is that without cooperation among all levels of employees, law firms would be immobilized.

Employee engagement is impacted by the following five key areas:

### 1. Your Corporate Culture

It takes little time and effort to earn employees' loyalty and respect. Enable your employees to develop by providing them with challenging work, and let them know the firm's accomplishments are a result of their contributions. Encourage, invest in and provide the resources for your employees' personal and professional growth. Endeavor to maintain family-friendly cultures and supportive structures that help employees strike a balance between their jobs and their personal lives.

Your message to your employees should be clear: your firm is committed to excellence; as such, you strive to select high-caliber individuals who share your commitment to integrity, quality work product, and mutual respect. In return, the firm will recognize and reward employees for their efforts and contributions. Avoid the impression that the focus of the firm is only on its attorneys; your support personnel are an integral part of your firm's success.

### 2. The Work Environment

Employee turnover increases in an unpleasant work environment. Those employees who remain feel alienated and demoralized. Train supervisors and attorneys to lead by example. Loyalty cannot be earned in the midst of disrespect and inequality. Employees are increasingly reporting little trust in their organizations' leaders, in part due to the current recession, reduced benefits, and the downsizing that results in fewer employees doing more work. In a difficult economy, attorneys, managers and leaders must create a positive environment of mutual respect, integrity and open communication.

Seek employees' input on projects and procedures. Encourage them to take initiative and ownership of their work. Empowerment in one's work improves performance and productivity. Acknowledge your support staff's skill and experience in their area of expertise, and allow them to help and guide you. An experienced legal secretary, for example, is an invaluable asset to a new associate and his or her overall success. Nurture your employees' self-esteem by including them in celebrations of successful cases or projects. They will be more likely to invest in your work and share in your pride. Greet them with a smile, and take a personal interest by asking them about the things that matter to them.

### 3. Compensation and Benefits

A firm's compensation package, including salary increases and bonuses, should be based in part on local market surveys. Although merit and performance are important factors in determining an employee's salary, uncompetitive compensation packages result in expensive turnover.

Equally important are competitive benefits that offer protection to working professionals and their families. Design your health and dental plans so that they meet the needs of your personnel. Offer added security through life and disability insurance, paid time off, 401(k) and profit sharing plans.



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#### **4. Training and Career Growth**

Human beings have a natural need to grow and develop. Supplement your compensation and benefits with training and development opportunities. Recognize key achievements by providing praise for a job well done, and allow employees to advance by promoting from within your firm. Reward your achievers with a title change or added responsibilities. Providing training and development will pay off with a skilled workforce and increased loyalty.

#### **5. Fun and Perks**

Never underestimate the effect of fun (and food) in the workplace. Firm celebrations and fun events result in happy employees and increased effort. There are many perks and rewards even for the budget-conscious firm. Consider monthly birthday celebrations, weekly treats or the occasional company picnic. Surprise a hard-working employee with a gift card or show your appreciation with flowers or chocolate. Celebrate a holiday with a potluck. Remember employment anniversaries and reward length of service. Appoint a team to organize fun activities for all employees to participate in. Creating a fun, energetic atmosphere will keep your firm as a great place to work.

Nurturing your firm culture through respect, appreciation, rewards and fun will ultimately produce engaged and motivated support staff. Clients will reap the benefits of improved service as productivity and profits increase.

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