

How 6 BigLaw Firms Are Making Retention A Priority

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360 (August 15, 2022, 4:38 PM EDT) -- As the recruitment wars of 2021 fade into a calmer state of affairs this year, many law firms are shifting some of their focus and resources from hiring to place a greater emphasis on retaining talent.

Many large firms added a lot of new faces over the last two years as demand for legal services soared, and many of those people joined on a remote or at least partially remote basis, often seeing their new colleagues less than used to be the case. According to several law firm leaders, that has created some challenges around retention.

"We did make major investments in recruiting these talented people to our firm, and the only way for us to reap the benefits of bringing in that talent is by focusing on our retention efforts," said Neha Nissen, chief talent officer at Fenwick & West LLP.

The prospect of keeping lawyers in place is also more challenging than ever now, with a fluid lateral job market, many people rethinking their careers amid the pandemic, and the ease of finding job prospects online.

"The reality of the world today is that in order to retain people you have to make this a very compelling place to work," said Jon Van Gorp, chair of Mayer Brown LLP.

Attorneys and staff often care about a number of factors when it comes to where they work, including having a clear career path with opportunities for advancement, finding a sense of purpose and meaning through their work, finding a workplace that is flexible and works with the person's individual needs, and finding connection and belonging in their workplace.

"It's not just about a paycheck" anymore, Van Gorp said.

Here, leaders from Fenwick, Mayer Brown, Steptoe & Johnson LLP, Dechert LLP, Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati PC and Stoel Rives LLP share their thoughts on the challenge of retention in today's legal market and how they seek to rise to that challenge.

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MELISSA JONES
Stoel Rives

Connection and Belonging in a Remote World

As law firms continue to operate under a hybrid model where lawyers come in to the office a few days a week and work from home other days, and some law firms allow attorneys to work completely remotely, many firm leaders are thinking hard about how to preserve the "glue" that keeps people at their law firms and creates a sense of belonging.

"In the past, in a world where people were in the office five days a week, it was easier for there to be integration and retention organically," said Gwen Renigar, chair of Steptoe & Johnson. "But now we've found, for us, we don't want to take retention for granted, and we're trying to be more programmatic. We're trying to be more methodical and more thoughtful about making sure that glue stays strong."

Melissa Jones, managing partner of Stoel Rives, says her firm has been working to create meaningful connections and positive experiences that attorneys can look forward to when they do come into the office, giving them good reasons to be there in a hybrid remote world.

"People do want flexibility in the long term, but I think having a strong culture and sense of community is an important aspect in terms of retaining top talent," Jones said.

According to Cherie Conrad Beffa, director of attorney recruiting at Wilson Sonsini, her firm has encouraged practice group leaders to communicate with group members to find common days the teams are in the office so that they can collaborate and don't come in simply to "wave at people and then close their office door."

That often means the groups have lunch together and do training and meetings on days when many of them are in the office, Beffa said.

"It became clear very early on in the pandemic that attorneys found working from home very appealing, but they likewise found interactions in the office hugely valuable as well," she said. "One size didn't fit all, so we talked to all of the groups across the firm and let them determine their own norms."

Investing in Attorneys' Career Success

When thinking about retention, many law firms are looking to career development as a way to ensure lawyers feel as if they not only belong at the firm but also have a bright future there.

"What else can we do for our attorneys to provide a good experience? Training and development and really thinking about how associates can build their careers," Beffa said.

Wilson Sonsini has expanded its career development department recently, adding employees and expanding the number of people they're able to help.

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CHERIE CONRAD BEFFA
Wilson Sonsini

"Once Cherie's team recruits amazing people, we point them in the right direction, talk to them about their career path and really support them any way we can," said the department's director, Elizabeth Blong.

Dechert, meanwhile, has focused on reinvigorating its mentoring program as it thinks about retaining lawyers, according to Alison Nina Bernard, chief talent and human resources officer.

The firmwide program pairs associates with partner mentors who make sure their mentees have access to career advice, development activities and work opportunities, Bernard said.

Associates are asked to complete an individual goal plan with their mentor to establish development goals, and then the program includes an array of training and resources, guided check-ins, networking events, and informal coffees and lunches.

"The program is measured through quarterly surveys that ensure that the pairs are meeting and the associates are satisfied," Bernard said. "Associates always have the option of selecting a new mentor. The program's effectiveness is also measured against data on retention, program leavers and promotions."

Focusing on Flexibility and Individualization

Many law firms are avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches to retention and are working to individualize their efforts by asking attorneys what they want from their jobs and careers and then working to help them to achieve those goals.

"We really dig deeper into identifying what the needs of the individual associate are — whether there's training needs, coaching needs, needs with respect to integration, mental health needs — then we meet them where they are at as individuals," Nissen said.

"When we recruit as much as we have over the last few years, it can be very easy for associates to feel like they are one of many and caught in the rat race of BigLaw," she said. "For Fenwick the key to retention is making sure they have those trusted advisers throughout the firm who see them as the individuals they are."

According to Van Gorp, one thing Mayer Brown is focusing on is empowerment of individual attorneys and staff.

"We aim to give employees at all levels the room to grow and achieve and feel supported in their career development and empowered to achieve their goals," Van Gorp said.

One way is with an open architecture system of work allocation where associates can find an area of law they're interested in and easily home in on that area, working for different partners as they choose.

"That is helpful because people are able to find something that really interests them," he said.

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NEHA NISSEN
Fenwick & West

Offering a Sense of Purpose and Meaning

Attorneys today often want to derive a sense of meaning from their jobs and feel as if they are, at least in some small way, making the world around them better, the law firm leaders said.

That's why many law firms are amping up their pro bono opportunities, offering billable hour credit for internal diversity, equity and inclusion work, and making sure they offer ample time off for attorneys looking to volunteer in their communities.

"Attorneys more than ever are looking for a sense of purpose and meaning in what they do," Nissen said.

She said that at Fenwick many associates join because they like the prospect of working on technology and life sciences matters for clients that are "innovating and looking to change the world."

But on top of that the law firm offers opportunities for lawyers to serve their broader communities, including through DEI work and pro bono work. Many associates are passionate about topics such as reproductive rights, voting rights and climate change, Nissen said.

"For our associates, they are really excited about the client work we do, but they are also interested in making an impact in other ways that will benefit their broader communities and society," she said.

--Editing by Brian Baresch and Orlando Lorenzo.