

HOW TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN YOUNG ATTORNEYS

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The leading edge of Generation Y (also known the Millennial or Nexter generation) is starting to enter the workforce at law firms across the country. Is your firm ready?

Gen Yers grew up with cell phones, e-mail, Internet, video and computer games and, quite often, involved parents who taught them to reach for the stars. This generation:

- Values technology
- Multi-tasks with ease
- Seeks meaningful work
- Enjoys collaboration
- Expects freedom to enjoy life
- Wants flexibility at work
- Questions authority
- Is socially conscious
- Changes jobs in search of more fulfilling work

A quick survey of people in the front lines of hiring decisions at some of the largest New Hampshire law firms confirms that young attorneys are looking for more than just the chance to make partner. Meredith Cook, an attorney at Wiggin & Nourie and a member of the firm's hiring committee, says that young prospects are asking questions that were never raised, even just a few years ago. In particular, she says they want to know details about the firm's pro bono work, and are expressing the desire to be part of a team. Joe DiBrigida, president of Sheehan Phinney Bass + Green, observes that "this generation spends a little more time figuring out what they really want and going after it."

Law firms that can adapt their cultures to the demands and expectations of this new generation will improve their ability to recruit top talent and retain their young associates. Here are a few steps that firms can take:

Offer flexibility – Gen Yers want to be able to shape their job to their lifestyle.

Whenever possible, give them choices in how they work. Options to consider include a non-partner track with fewer billable hour requirements (and lower pay), regular sabbaticals after an attorney has put in a certain number of years at the firm, part-time positions, or even just a few days off after an intense work period.

Provide tasks in context – Gen Yers want to work on things that they find important and meaningful. Before assigning a task, take the time to explain who the client is, what the case is about and why the task is important. Show the young attorney how his or her work contributed to a legal document, trial argument or other final product.

Break up the routine – Millennials grew up with constant stimulation. They are not going to be happy if all of sudden they are left doing the same work day after day. Vary the types of assignments given new associates, and provide a variety of different types of learning opportunities. Take new associates to court, depositions, client meetings and lunches with more senior attorneys.

Start a mentoring program -- Partners tend to operate as individual profit centers and have little time to share their expertise or create bonds with young associates. That's unfortunate, because Millennials want the feedback and crave the sense of community gained from working with and learning from others. Formalize a system by which a partner gets to know a young attorney, listens to his or her ideas, answers questions, shows how the new attorney's work fits into the overall success of the firm, and discusses long-range planning issues. This mentor will come to understand what motivates his or her younger coworker, and will be able to communicate this information to other partners.

Enhance your professional development program – The road to partnership can be painfully long to a generation accustomed to immediate results and feedback. Develop achievement milestones along the way so young attorneys can set short-term goals.

Clearly communicate goals for specific projects: Millennials are the products of a testing culture. They want to know what they need to do, how their performance will be measured, and what constitutes a great job. Separate work responsibilities into specific projects and clearly communicate expectations for success. Use multiple ways to communicate to enhance understanding.

Provide regular feedback: Forget annual reviews. Millennials grew up with instant feedback from computer and video games, hovering parents and text messaging friends. Create a coaching culture in which attorneys get feedback and support on a regular basis.

Hold leadership summits – Millennials don't hesitate to challenge authority or think of ways they could do a job better than their boss. Let them voice their opinions and ideas in regular brainstorming sessions where ideas are welcomed from all attorneys. Solicit input about the firm's goals and policies and be prepared to amend current goals and strategies if attorney feedback indicates that a change is needed.

Invest in technology: Millennials are accustomed to communicating and working with technology. They have been known to leave a firm that they feel is technologically behind the times.

Expand pro bono and community service programs: Meaningful work – especially for those less fortunate – is very important for socially aware Gen Yers. They welcome the opportunity to get involved in the community and tend to be very interested in doing pro bono work. With proper supervision, pro bono work is also an excellent way to give young attorneys a chance to learn and expand their skills outside of the firm's four walls.

In the end, your ability to create a meaningful work environment will depend on your flexibility and adaptability to the many needs of the new workforce. Embracing this fact sooner, rather than later, will help your firm attract and retain the top lawyers of tomorrow.

Read Part I: “Generational Differences Between Attorneys” in *The NH Bar News*, May 2008 issue.

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