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# How To Lure Laterals And Keep Them In Your Firm's Net

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360, New York (June 20, 2016, 4:51 PM ET) -- Lateral movement in the legal industry has been on a hot streak in recent years, compelling BigLaw firms to spend big bucks in the fight to recruit and hire top talent without any guarantee new hires will stay put for more than a minute.

According to a recent report by the National Association for Law Placement, lateral hiring across the legal sector climbed 8.5 percent between 2014 and 2015, rising to the highest levels it's reached since 2003 as law firms averaged 15 lateral hires per office.

Yet a large number of firms lack effective strategies for hiring the best-fit laterals and for properly integrating new hires in such a way that convinces them to stay on long-term.

"My bird's-eye view allows me to see how most of the firms in the Am Law 200 integrate their lateral partners and I can tell you that it is only a small number of firms that do it effectively," said Gloria Sandrino, principal of partner and group recruiting at Lateral Link. "[Firms] should be thinking about lateral partner integration from day one."

The huge amount of time and money firms invest finding and hiring recruits makes it imperative for them to have a detailed and smart plan for integrating new hires as well as innovative strategies to convince those new hires to stay put, legal recruiters say.

Here, Sandrino and other experts weigh in on effective hiring and integration strategies for attracting and retaining top talent.

## Ask The Right Questions During Hiring

The first step to retaining laterals happens during the hiring process, examining whether an attorney will mesh well with their colleagues, whether they share the firm's values, and whether they have had trouble sticking with other law firms in the past, experts say.

"A firm should ask thoughtful questions to determine whether a particular candidate might be a good fit," said Diane Rifkin, founder of Rifkin Consulting. "Such questions might include discussing a candidate's long-term goals, a review of previous positions and performance regardless of industry, and can help determine whether a large firm or more intimate environment would help the candidate thrive."

While asking questions that will help determine the size of a candidate's book of business, legal acumen or status as a rising star, interviewers should also analyze a candidate's answers under the lens of whether the potential hire is likely jump ship after a year or two, she says.

Barbara Mayden, co-founder of Young Mayden Legal Search and Recruiting, says that looking at a candidate's track record is one quick way to assess their chances of staying put, but emphasizes that digging up the reasons for the candidate's past moves is more important than simply calling it off if they have moved around a lot.

"Obviously the hiring firm needs to wrap its arms around how many ships the candidate has set

sail on before," Mayden said. "But when the potential lateral has a resume with pocket parts, it should be a yellow flag — not a red one. In this new world there are often very good reasons for each of those moves. But drill down on that."

### **Carefully Consider Who Interviewees Will Meet**

When it comes to which partners a potential hire will meet during the interview process, Sandrino says that the potential associate or partner should be introduced to a varied lineup of people inside the firm who can suss out what kind of fit the move would create.

"So many firms don't pay enough attention to the lineup [of partners candidates are to meet during the interview process], so lateral partners are not meeting partners that can really assess the value of the lateral partner or show them why the firm is the right platform for his or her practice," she said.

Sandrino added that every round of interviews should be made up of partners who will contribute to the lateral candidate's integration in some way.

"I see so many firms that have their set lineups, which have very little to do with the candidate that is in front of them," she said. "The best firms, in my opinion, build their lineups after each round of interviews, learning about the partner and who he or she would benefit to interview with after each round."

### **Have An Integration Plan In Place**

The best way to attract laterals and keep them from jumping ship too soon is to properly integrate them into the new firm, says Andrea Hartwell, a legal recruiter at Swan Legal Search.

And firms simply cannot properly integrate lateral hires if they do not have a formal process for doing so, she says.

Introducing a new lateral internally by email and having a 5 p.m. cocktail party in his or her honor is not integration, according to Mayden. Instead, firms should focus on integrating a lateral hire's work with that of his or her colleagues and should do so through a well-structured and planned-out process.

"If law firms focused on how expensive it is to bring someone onboard versus the costs of integration, it's much cheaper to focus on integration," Hartwell said.

Mayden suggested law firms come up with a work integration plan for laterals as soon as they come onboard, beginning by conveying goals to the new hire, and followed by outlining the steps they must take to begin cross-selling with their colleagues, and the responsibilities they are expected to take on.

### **Get Established Attorneys Involved In The Integration Process**

Hartwell says many firms brag about their commitment to integrating new lawyers, but that extends only as far as assigning them a mentor who will take them out for a few lunches, and that's the end of it. But, she says, that's not enough to fully integrate a lateral.

Lateral associates should be matched with a partner who truly values their success, has time to offer mentoring and makes sure they become a part of the team, she says.

"You have to have someone in the firm whose job is to make sure associates who come onboard not only understand how their personal and professional goals fit with the firm, but also the expectations the firm has for them," Hartwell said. "I think oftentimes that is really blurred."

Mayden says that effective law firms usually have a senior level partner in charge of the integration plan's implementation and there are usually rewards and accountability for action or inaction both on the part of the new hire and their assigned mentor.

Sandrino suggested that one way to spur on the integration of partners is by creating a mechanism in the firm's compensation system that allows for the incentivization of existing partners to participate in the lateral hire's integration.

"Several firms in the Am Law, for example, use lateral partner integration initiatives as the main factor for end-of-the-year bonuses," she explained. "By having an incentivization component to the partner's compensation system, the firm's partners are all encouraged to participate in the integration of each lateral partner. In addition, all partners get involved, even those who are not part of the lateral partner integration plan."

--Editing by Rebecca Flanagan and Emily Kokoll.

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