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Create a Unified Team By Integrating Your Talent Functions

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As firms strive to maximize operational efficiencies and increase the effectiveness of recruiting and retention across the talent spectrum, many are evaluating how to best align their talent function to the firm's values and business objectives, essentially with the common goal of delivering excellent client service and enhancing employee career satisfaction. At smaller firms, staff and attorney recruiting and support functions have often been handled by one individual under one umbrella. But as firms have become larger and more diversified, the stratification between those functions has become more pronounced, often with very little interaction or shared common vision between the departments,

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as well as separate processes, policies, databases and reporting structures.

This bifurcated system can result in lower employee morale, less shared investment in the firm's overall strategic mission, inefficient duplication and a missed opportunity to maximize the development and retention of all firm talent. Through better integration, all talent can be recruited and trained at more comparable levels of sophistication, collaborate more effectively and become more uniformly aligned with the firm's core business mission. In order to evaluate how an integrated talent model could best be implemented at a particular firm, it is necessary to examine the current structures, potential synergies and the opportunities, challenges and best practices for implementation.

REPORTING STRUCTURE

The structure of the talent function is one area ripe for consolidation. At many larger firms in

particular, there are completely separate departments and reporting avenues for staff and attorney acquisition and support functions. Lead titles on the attorney side might include Chief Legal Personnel Officer, Chief Legal Recruiting Officer and Chief Attorney Development Officer, with the attorney functions often reporting up through an administrative partner. On the staff side, there might be a Director of Human Resources, who handles all staff talent operations for those who would report to an operations professional. This siloed approach can lead to a lack of communication among functions, a compromised holistic understanding of the firm's strategic goals and an "us vs. them" mentality.

As a result, staff members often feel undervalued and, as one chief human resource professional termed it, like "invisible servants." According to other lead talent professionals, personnel on the human resources side are often

further removed from client interaction than those handling the attorney functions. Therefore, they have less appreciation of the firm's core mission, and lack a flexible and responsive approach to client service. In either case, more comprehensive team leadership could be beneficial. In firms that have integrated, there is one lead administrator — whether titled Chief People Officer, Chief Human Resources Officer or Chief Talent Officer — who can promote communication, a consistent message and investment in a common vision throughout the talent pipeline.

How firms actually approach the integration of functions depends on the firm's current paradigm and dynamics. Paul Hastings LLP is one firm that has uniquely restructured its talent management function to promote a global "one firm approach" by creating Centers of Excellence in the areas of recruiting, development, compensation and benefits, and shared support service led by a Chief Talent Officer. In this model, there are Directors of Talent Acquisition and Talent Development that lead the recruiting, training and development functions for both staff and attorney populations, and a shared services team led by a Director of Talent Management who handles employee relations, compliance and human resources policies for all personnel. Susan Manch, the Chief of People and Development at Norton Rose Fulbright, also successfully restructured the talent

functions at her firm by appointing one lead professional to oversee all back office operations, including evaluations and compensation systems, and by combining the staff and attorney training and development functions. Similarly, at Lowenstein Sandler LLP, Alice De Lancey, the Chief Human Resources Officer, designated one Director of Career Development to oversee all training and development and one Director of Human Resources to oversee all matters relating to benefits and employment policies.

Unlike at Paul Hastings, however, which has integrated all talent operations, some firms like Norton Rose Fulbright and Lowenstein Sandler have chosen to keep the attorney and staff recruiting processes managed separately but still encompassed under one talent umbrella — though at Norton Rose Fulbright, the attorney recruiting and development functions also report to traditional hiring and evaluation committees. At these firms, frequent team meetings that include all staff leaders promote collaboration and the sharing of best practices and resources.

De Lancey, for example, fosters team education on all aspects of talent management, including recruiting, performance management, training and benefits, so that each member can gain a broader perspective of the department's services as well as a more comprehensive understanding of the firm's overall business mission.

Such collaboration promotes a more seamless transition between the recruiting and onboarding of candidates with the talent professionals feeling more invested in the process. In addition, both the staff and attorney recruiters at Lowenstein Sandler use similar recruiting tools, including LinkedIn and job boards such as Indeed.com and employeereferal.com, to leverage contacts and source candidates. While paradigms may vary, a unified talent management department fosters a more informed, well-rounded and cohesive team, which benefits the entire firm population.

SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES

Efficiencies can be achieved not only by restructuring the talent department but also by eliminating duplication of systems and processes. Many firms employ separate policies and databases for attorneys and staff in areas such as recruiting, performance management, and leave and benefits with different staff administering each of these areas. For example, many firms use ViDesktop for attorney recruiting and performance management, but a completely different system, such as Peoplesoft, for staff recruiting. Other firms use one system for staff and attorney recruiting, but separate systems for performance management. By combining some or all systems into a database, such as Workday or Ultipro, many firms including Paul Hastings, Norton Rose

Fulbright and Lowenstein Sandler have been able to manage all processes more comprehensively and cost-effectively.

In addition, by assigning one professional team with designated oversight over the combined systems, staff responsibilities are streamlined. For example, when Manch combined systems at Norton Rose Fulbright, she put an operations manager in charge of compensation and performance management for all talent. At Paul Hastings, the Director of Talent Development oversees performance management and the Director of Talent Strategy oversees the Human Resource Information System (HRIS). As an added reward, Manch and other talent leaders note that even the process of integrating the databases resulted in enhanced collaboration by all the talent management professionals as they worked together to unify the systems.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT, AND DIVERSITY

Firms have also reaped significant benefit by broadening their approach to talent development. While many firms already have some form of attorney training in place, there is often little or no attention devoted to that of the staff. This is particularly the case in such areas as management and other skills training, career planning and general education regarding the firm's business purpose and operations. Firms that have designated

one lead professional or group to oversee training and development for both the staff and attorney populations have been better able to conduct a holistic needs assessment and responsively design and deliver more effective training to the benefit of all personnel.

For example, both Norton Rose Fulbright and Lowenstein Sandler offer a host of programs for attorneys and staff to develop their substantive competence, strengthen their skills in delivering feedback and performance management, and ensure the provision of the most effective client service. At Lowenstein Sandler, De Lancie has also instituted bi-monthly lunch meetings for her entire staff that feature attorney presentations on different practice areas; established a breakfast series of open forums hosted by the Managing Partner for all employees to foster a more direct connection to firm leadership; included both staff and attorneys in Town Hall meetings; and created a career path for secretaries, all of which have resulted in the firm having won numerous "best places to work" awards.

To build on the robust attorney performance management program that had already been established at Paul Hastings, Holly Johnston, Director of Talent Development, spearheaded a needs assessment for the staff; implemented an e-learning platform with offerings including leadership, communication and time management; and individually coached

staff on setting goals to align with the firm's strategic direction.

In the area of diversity, many firms have traditionally designed initiatives for the attorney population that have not involved the staff (*i.e.*, affinity groups, firm receptions, speaker presentations and recruiting directives). This focus may result from the fact that firms have more commonly been evaluated through surveys and rankings only on the diversity of their attorneys, and because diversity of outside counsel has become more important to clients. Firms with a more integrated talent management strategy, however, have created a more inclusive paradigm to better reflect the firm's core values in this area. For example, Manch and her team at Norton Rose Fulbright have developed firm-wide, diversity-related events and designed and delivered relevant firm-wide training, such as unconscious bias and non-harassment. Other firms have also started allowing staff to participate in their affinity groups and have become more proactive in building a diverse staff population. If diversity is a firm priority, a more inclusive culture could only advance this important mission to the benefit of the firm and its clients.

CHALLENGES AND BEST PRACTICES

While there are clearly benefits to a "one-firm" talent management structure, a firm has to be culturally and functionally ready for the

change. In many firms, the “us vs. them” mindset is so deeply ingrained in the firm’s culture that it becomes difficult to embrace or even envision a paradigm shift. This manifests more commonly in a reluctance to relinquish the management function to an administrative staff member at the firm, particularly by the attorneys who traditionally have had oversight over attorney recruiting and development. It is thereby essential that firm leadership shares and supports the vision. Moreover, in evaluating a restructure, it is important, as Manch notes, “to put the right systems under the right people.” That endeavor might require providing additional formal and informal training, such as mentoring and shadowing, to appropriately develop additional skillsets, whether it be the area of benefits, personnel policies, performance management, professional development, recruiting or onboarding.

Once firm leadership embraces the integration concept, the firm should conduct a total analysis of functions, roles, policies and systems to see where synergies can be identified within its particular structure. It is not necessarily a “one size fits all” approach. Some firms, for example, have redistributed staff responsibilities, but kept databases separate; others have done the reverse. Moreover, there are some policies that might not be equally applicable across the talent spectrum, such

as flex-time and working remotely, which often work better for the attorney population than the non-exempt staff.

It is also important to “socialize” the idea throughout the firm. This entails conducting extensive outreach to promote understanding of the new structure, and obtaining buy-in from both staff and attorney populations. It would also require demonstrating to all firm members the value each administrative function contributes to the firm’s business and explaining any impact changes might have on the distribution of roles and services to avoid confusion. As a helpful tool, the Chief Operating Officer at Norton Rose Fulbright conducts a presentation for attorneys to demonstrate how all operations keep the business functioning seamlessly, including, of course, the acquisition and development of talented professionals. Finally, patience is required. According to Johnston at Paul Hastings, it can take several years to ensure that all the necessary resources are secured, that talent is appropriately aligned and that the organization is fully ready to accept the change.

CONCLUSION

While the process of integrating talent acquisition and support functions can be intensive, the benefits of alignment to the organization are many. The resulting cost efficiencies, enhanced employee morale and more holistic approach to the acquisition and

retention of a high-functioning workforce allow for effectuation of a true business paradigm. Having talent functions administered by human resource professionals who understand the firm’s strategic objectives allows those professionals to feel valued and respected as true business partners and the attorneys to focus their energies on billable work. And, with all firm professionals committed toward the same core mission, the ultimate goal of delivering the highest level of client service can be realistically achieved.



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