

'Y' Worry?

Recruiting and Retaining the Younger Generations

By Sarah J. Read & Susanne C. Medley

What is needed to recruit and retain the younger generations? Some firms have offered iPods, iPhones, limousine rides to and from the airport, or tickets to rock concerts. Many have tried higher and higher salaries. The answer to this question is, however, far more basic.

Although much has been written about generational differences, the generations are not all that different in terms of essential human needs and values. Everyone wants to be valued, we all would like to live lives that have some purpose and meaning, and we all need security to plan and build our lives. This means that effective communication, respect for an individual's opinions and interests, and assurance that hard work will be fairly rewarded, are more critical to recruiting and retaining associates than gadgets or even more dollars. How these basic values affect recruitment and retention is addressed further below.

COMMUNICATIONS

Most coaches and sales people know that building a relationship is key to effective recruitment, and relationships are also critical to retention. Research indicates that the younger generations, while not loyal to institutions, can be very loyal to individuals.¹ Strong relationships are built through effective communication. The day to day interactions between lawyers can make a significant difference in how satisfied any lawyer is with working at the firm. What are the communications like within your firm? Are they collegial or competitive? Friendly, reserved, or at times hostile?

How partners and associates communicate regarding the work that is being done is, not surprisingly, a particularly critical area for recruiting and retaining associates. In preparing for this article, the authors sent out surveys to recent law school graduates. Although not enough responses were returned to provide a statistically valid sample, several useful comments were

shared and the importance of adequate mentoring, training and feedback was a clearly identifiable theme. For example, one respondent wrote as follows: "A job that does not provide good mentoring capabilities (either informal or formal) isn't worth exploring in my opinion. I can deal without the training and technology if I have a good mentor in my corner that can help guide me to being successful and whom I can ask questions."²

Other evidence underscores this point. For example, research indicates that lack of feedback is the primary source of performance problems and one of the top reasons people of any generation leave their jobs.³ Additional research shows that while every individual needs some praise, the younger generations have been trained to expect praise and grow anxious or restless without it.⁴ One firm was able to significantly improve its position in the *American Lawyer* midlevel associate survey over a three-year period by focusing on issues like collegiality and

specifically focusing on improving communications with their associates.⁵ What are your firm's practices in providing feedback and training to associates? Is feedback provided on an ongoing basis, following each assignment? Is it at least periodic and thorough? Or is it haphazard and sporadic? Is feedback given in a way that teaches and guides, or in a way that attacks and demoralizes?

Partners who are familiar with the concept of being a "servant leader"—that is, partners who actively mentor, pitch in to help complete the more menial tasks in times of crisis, and even on occasion cover a weekend to allow a valued associate to meet a personal obligation or interest—communicate through actions that their associates are important members of the firm community, and thus are more likely to recruit and retain valued associates.

MEANINGFUL OPPORTUNITIES

Providing younger lawyers with opportunities to "make a difference" will also help with both recruitment and retention. In considering whether your firm provides the type of opportunities younger attorneys look for, ask the following questions: How does our firm delegate work? Are associates limited to work for one or just a few, or does the firm have a process to ensure a range of work opportunities? Are opportunities provided for associates to work on cases of particular interest or to decline certain matters? Can associates work on firm-approved pro bono matters, and count the time against billable hours? Are even young associates invited to participate in at least some client conferences and strategy meetings? Are their opinions on the cases they work on sought, and considered? One unhappy associate wrote the following in response to our first article in this series: ". . . due to

longer and better health, partners are not stepping aside and passing clients on. Partners are not training associates. Partners are not teaching associates how to create their own books. The younger generation views partners as wanting to keep the younger generations as indentured servants."⁶ Associates who feel like indentured servants are likely to burn out and leave.

Another component of meaning and purpose for younger lawyers is work-life balance. Providing opportunities to balance professional and personal lives is particularly important to recruiting and retaining associates. Although this emphasis is sometimes scoffed at by older lawyers who may not have questioned working long hours, this emphasis actually reveals a value shared across the generations—that of caring for one's family. In surveys by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), the most often cited value among all age groups was that of family.⁷ The younger generations do not, however, view working long hours as benefiting this value:

In my father's time, people went to work for organizations believing that they, themselves, had to adapt to fit the organization. They believed that was the key to success, and they would be taken care of. Of course people today realize they won't be taken care of—but more importantly Gen Xers are also frustrated by the inability of an organization to adapt to their needs and desires.⁸

In our survey, a number of respondents indicated an interest in staying at a firm and making partner. Each also indicated, however, that they would not do so if it meant they could not enjoy a healthy family life. Firms that provide flex time options, and allow

younger lawyers—both men and women—to work on occasion from home or to otherwise adjust their hours to meet family needs are more likely to attract and retain their associates.

SECURITY

The concept that younger workers are not as loyal as their counterparts is often repeated as fact but may be more like an urban legend when analyzed more closely. Data indicates that the "loyalty" different generations display to their employers may reflect different contexts.⁹ Put simply, someone closer to retirement is more likely to remain with the same firm than a recent graduate. A Gen Xer with many opportunities is likely to pursue new positions without a Boomer's fear of being left without a job.

"Job security" is, however, important to these younger generations, although it is defined differently. They are more likely to define it in terms of having a portable set of skills than as hanging on to a position at an institution that may change, merge, or go out of business. Associates who believe they will be learning new skills—skills they feel will enhance their employability if they ever have to leave the firm they are with, are more likely to be attracted to a firm, and once there, are more likely to stay.¹⁰

Gen Xers in particular also learned growing up to be self-reliant and to be wary of over reliance on others.¹¹ Thus they are constantly evaluating their options. How are your associates evaluating their chances for partnership? Will they wait to find out or be eager instead to take another attractive opportunity that happens to present itself? In addition to letting associates know their work is valued, firms can help recruit and retain associates by providing career path certainty, and this can be done in a way consistent with the traditional (and

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realistic) view that partnership—which is dependent on many factors—can never be guaranteed, even for those who are doing well. However the firm can provide other options—of counsel positions, help in transitioning to in-house jobs with key clients—and options that assure associates that if they do not make partner they will not be simply shoved out the door and stranded.

Twenty years ago, when Sarah first started interviewing law students on behalf of a larger firm, she could honestly say, “Our firm views every associate as an individual with a unique blend of skills and interests. When you are choosing between firms, consider which ones value you as an individual and which regard their associates as fungible commodities.” This resonated with recruits 20 years ago and still does today. Developing a culture that is attuned to the needs of each individual and that provides meaningful opportunities is still the best way to recruit and retain associates.

This is the third and final article in a three-part series on generations in the workplace which has appeared in Precedent.

ENDNOTES

1. Nancy R. Peppard, *Closing the Generation Gap*, 32 Law Practice 30, 34 (June 2006).

2. Authors’ survey sent to students and graduates of Missouri law schools. The comments received also were consistent with those reported from associates in other areas in *The American Lawyer* and ABA publications cited throughout this article.

3. Leigh Branham, *The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave*, Executive Update (Feb. 2005). See also <http://www.asaecenter.org/PublicationsResources/EUIssue.cfm?ItemNumber+11509>.

4. Jeffrey Zaslow, *The Most-Praised Generation goes to Work*, Wall St. J., Apr. 20, 2007, at W7. This article focuses on the younger generations’ need for constant feedback and praise. As reported in the article, some corporations have even hired “celebrations assistants” whose sole focus is to provide this praise. The article also includes some useful guidelines, in a break out box titled “the art of constructive compliments,” on how to provide praise without overdoing it.

5. Elizabeth Goldberg, *Finnegan’s Leap*, *The American Lawyer* (Aug. 2006).

6. Confidential e-mail sent to the authors.

7. Jennifer J. Deal, *Ten Truths for Working Across Generations*, Center for Creative Leadership, May 6, 2007.

8. Confidential e-mail, *supra*.

9. Deal, *supra*.

10. See Goldberg, *supra* and Diane Theilfoldt & Devon Scheef, *Generation X and The Millennials: What You Need to Know About Mentoring the New Generations*, *Law Practice Today* (Aug. 2004).

11. Marcia Pennington Shannon, *Recruiting & Retaining Lawyers: A Generational*

Approach, 32 Law Practice 38, 39 (Jun. 2006). See also Elizabeth Goldberg, *Exit Strategy*, *The American Lawyer* (Aug. 2006) and Jill Schachner Chanen, *The Great Divide: Partners and Associates Are at Odds Over Opposing Approaches at Work, Play and the Practice of Law*, *ABA Journal* 45, 49 (May 2006).



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