

Can Law Firms Keep Young Lawyers Happy?

In talking with optimistic and motivated attorneys, a few solutions for law firms present themselves.

By **Carolyn Casey** | May 02, 2019 at 12:24 PM



In an **extremely competitive** legal talent market, just what can law firms do to keep young lawyers, happy and motivated? In talking with a group of young, happy, optimistic and committed attorneys, I found some secrets to the puzzle. The lawyers I spoke with love their law firm jobs. These are some of the issues on their minds:

Pink-Think

When I listened to these young, ambitious lawyers, I heard themes that echoed what I was reading about “Motivation 3.0” in Daniel Pink’s book “Drive.” Pink believes that carrot-and-stick, control-oriented management has run its course. In modern organizations, Pink argues, sustainable, healthy employee motivation requires three things: autonomy, mastery and purpose. Is this possible in law firms? Is it what will keep new generations of lawyers’ motivation fresh and alive?

A Higher Purpose

We’ve all heard that millennials are socially conscious. So, I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised at how important higher purpose is to the young lawyers who shared their world with me.

A third-year Big Law litigation associate extols her boss for “constantly reminding us of our higher purpose, the practice group’s bigger picture—we keep government honest in applying the law. We are guardians of the law on behalf of our clients.” For her, lawyers who find fuel in a higher purpose have longer, happier careers than those simply grabbing a paycheck. By the way, her respect and loyalty to the partner are palpable.

“Being successful on my client’s behalf is success to me. Whatever that looks like—winning, settling or never going to trial if that’s what’s best for the client,” says a first-year at a 50-lawyer California firm. She wants to fight the good fight to get a sense of justice for her clients.

Another lawyer finds purpose and passion in a law firm technology and operations innovation role. “I knew legal wasn’t immune to technology disruption and thought it would be cool to have an impact,” says an innovation

manager at an Am Law 50 firm. She likes finding tools and tech to help people practice better. Very keen on providing client value, this young lawyer uses AI and data to show clients why certain deals took longer and how to improve on the next one.

Legal Mastery Isn't a Field of Daisies

Just like professional athletes and musicians, lawyers invest tremendous levels of effort and hours to master their craft. Pink must have channeled a Big Law associate when he said, “the path to mastery—becoming ever better at something you care about—is not lined with daisies and spanned by a rainbow.”

Young lawyers expect to work hard. Yet, even the most dedicated will have moments of frustration and wonder if it's all worth it.

Big Law faces the extra conundrum of associates seeking mastery for the long-term, nonguaranteed partnership brass ring, while burning the midnight oil to make partners rich in the short run. Many lawyers feel their firms don't care about their careers—their leverage to produce this year's partner profits is all that matters. What can firms do to keep talent going on the long journey?

Pink would advise more acknowledgment and celebration of associates' progress toward goals. It leads to more engagement and motivation, social scientists say. Spot bonuses for landing new business or finding a new way to efficiently solve a client problem are some of the things I hear more firms are doing.

The flourishing young lawyers are at firms that support their professional aspirations. “My career is as important as what I do for the firm. I put my heart

and soul in my work. I need to feel like the firm is investing in me,” commented one lawyer who switched firms due to a lack of mentoring.

Smart firms are making good on the promise of career development plans and regular feedback and mentoring sessions that young lawyers sweating toward mastery crave.

The Autonomy Urge

Autonomy is about choice and self-direction. It is a fundamental human need, experts say. Forbes reports workplace autonomy is a big job requirement for millennials. Traditional law firms are hierarchical, control organizations, with work assigned and directed largely by partners. With millennials swelling in the labor force, do law firms need to give some thought to satisfying the autonomy urge?

Pink sees the legal billable hour as “perhaps the most autonomy-crushing mechanism imaginable.” It encourages lawyers to lean toward racking up hours rather than unleashing creative energy to solve client problems efficiently. As clients demand more alternative fee arrangements for better value, firms might study the motivational impacts and outcome quality of these matters too.

Big Law partners tell us that technology and the flexibility it gives lawyers to work remotely increases autonomy. True enough in terms of when and where they work, but do they really have any choice?

Firms have done well offering young lawyers pro bono opportunities that not only feed the social conscience of young lawyers, but also give them some freedom to lead cases. Firms might also try experimenting with letting associates spend, say, 30 hours a quarter on a side project of their choice. As

Pink notes, 3M giving engineers freedom to choose side projects resulted in Post-it notes. What might come of associates spending even 30 hours a quarter on a project of their choice?

It offers some food for thought on how law firms can keep young lawyers happy, now and in the future.

Carolyn Casey is a former Big Law associate and technology marketer who writes about innovation and change in the legal market.

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