

Promoting a Culture of Efficiency in Law Firms: The Link to Talent Development

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In our most recent blogs, my colleague Carla Landry and I examined how law firms can successfully promote a culture of efficiency. Whether driven externally at the request of clients or internally by a firm's initiatives to improve profitability, efficiency is quickly becoming a hot topic in law firm management. Efficiencies can be achieved via a variety of means including the application of new technologies, process improvement, project management, and – my area of focus – talent.

Promoting a culture of efficiency via talent strategy can be viewed through three lenses:

- Attracting talent ([previous blog](#)),
- Developing talent (the topic of this blog), and
- Retaining talent (future blog).

Developing Talent...

When we think about “developing” talent, what do we mean? More than simply the basic advancement of lawyering skills, talent development also includes promoting and nurturing the social skills, leadership skills and cultural skills of the firm's lawyers and staff. There is no “one-size-fits-all” talent development model for law firms. Although there are common elements like mentorship, training and performance reviews, each firm's talent development will be unique based upon its culture and strategic goals.

So how can firms promote a culture of efficiency through their talent development? There is a multitude of ways. In fact, talent development is one of the most essential components of creating a culture of efficiency. Lawyers didn't go to law school to learn how to be efficient, so the skill sets inherent in practicing efficiently can feel counterintuitive to the “traditional” way lawyers approach their profession. How do firms overcome that obstacle? Talent development. Below I've highlighted four steps to implementing a culture of efficiency via talent development.

A first step is to reevaluate the skill sets a firm identifies and promotes via its professional development program. Are those skill sets aligned with efficiency? If not, adding programming and educational tools will demonstrate a significant commitment to efficiency. Process improvement and practice management programs are two examples.

A second step is to ensure that efficiency goals are effectively communicated at every level of the organization, including support staff, associates, partners and leadership. If a firm offers professional development programming on improving efficiencies, yet does not effectively communicate the importance, it's a wasted effort. Firm newsletters, emails, internal communications, mentoring relationships, practice group meetings, executive committee meetings and staff meetings should all communicate a dedication to efficiency. An important key to communication is demonstrating buy-in from senior firm leadership.

Third, law firms should reward behaviors that promote efficiencies, including recognition and incentives for reaching benchmarks and goals. When we think of incentives, money most often comes to mind. Without a doubt, compensation-related incentives can certainly motivate lawyers to improve efficiencies, and can be built into the achievement of profitability goals. However, non-monetary incentives such as acknowledgement by senior leadership, external commendations, additional job responsibilities and promotions, and lunch or dinner celebrating a “job well done” can be very impactful depending on the accomplishment and the firm’s culture.

Finally, the old adage of “What gets measured gets done” is key: Efficiency goals must be integrated into performance reviews, performance development plans and goal setting. Promoting a culture of efficiency requires defining actionable items, tangible goals and measurable outcomes and integrating them into the fabric of the firm. For example, performance reviews may require lawyers to identify at least one client or matter where they will improve process efficiencies and evaluate their progress on a regular basis. Similarly, performance development plans may include completion of a process improvement program.

To promote a culture of efficiency, a law firm must incorporate goals into every level of the firm’s talent development activities. These four steps will get firms headed in the right direction, and we will address the final component – talent retention – in the final blog in this series.