

Hiring Laterals

With an Eye on Business Development

The selection of lateral partners has long been the exclusive domain of lawyers. Not only are lawyers best able to evaluate the legal skills and reputation of another attorney, but determining with whom you would like to practice law in a partnership is an intensely personal choice. It's no surprise most firms keep lateral recruiting a lawyer driven and managed process.

But should they?

REMAKING THE OLD MODEL

Innovative law firms are increasingly bringing other disciplines into the lateral recruiting, selection, due diligence and integration processes. In particular, business development professionals are being embedded throughout the process. Firms are using their marketing professionals to assess a candidate's business development acumen, evaluate client portability, pitch the firm more effectively and develop more strategic integration and marketing plans.

"Embedding us early in the process improves the ROI of the lateral because they start their plan the day they begin at the firm and it puts us 25 steps ahead," said David Kaufman, director of regional sales, U.S. and international offices for Nixon Peabody LLP. "It radically improves the integration process."

Business development professionals are also being called on to assess the business development strengths of candidates. Should a lateral's client not port over, firms want assurances that the lateral has the business development skills to build a new book of business.

"Attorneys tend to focus on the legal skill sets of attorneys and how they will fit in to the practice," said Keith Solar, San Diego office managing partner for Buchanan, Ingersoll and Rooney PC. "Our [business development] folks add value to the process by figuring out who really knows how to develop business." Some firms, unhappy with the results of their lateral recruiting efforts, have even turned to marketing to re-engineer the entire process. That's what Mintz Levin did and the results have exceeded their expectations. Tapped by the firm's managing partner, Amy Fowler, Mintz Levin's chief marketing officer, mapped and examined the process starting from their relationships with recruiting firms and working through to the lateral's integration into the firm.



She found a need to deepen recruiting firm relationships, improve communication with the recruiters and tighten up the interviewing and integration processes. The changes she and Shannon Davis, director of legal recruiting, implemented include a mandatory lateral office tour facilitated by a dedicated business development manager, redesigning the interview process to ensure each attorney has a specific role in the interview and reorganizing the marketing group to better support laterals.

A NEW KIND OF LATERAL COMMITTEE

To manage the process, Fowler created a lateral recruiting committee made up of herself, the office managing partners, the firm's chief operating officer, the director of recruiting. The committee oversees every aspect of the process from interviewing and selection to managing any challenges that arise during the integration process.

Asked why the lateral recruiting committee was made up of office heads and not practice group leaders, Fowler's answer revealed the deep understanding she and the firm have gained in supporting lateral integration. "We have a firm strategic plan and it includes the target list of practice experience we are looking for," she offered. "But the laterals will be working and socializing most closely with the people in their office. Having the buy-in of the office managing partners early on really helps ensure there is support for that lateral in that office. It makes a big difference."

One critical aspect to the recruiting process is the lateral's business and marketing plan, the development of which is also starting earlier in the process. David Salisbury, West Coast director of business development at Mintz Levin, interviews every candidate in the western region to assess the lateral's business development skills and build an individualized marketing plan for each lateral.

"Not only have we become pretty accurate in being able to assess a candidate's business development abilities, but the deep dive we do in our interviews helps us map out an integration and marketing plan that makes the best use of the laterals time during their on-boarding," Salisbury said. "It's on their desk the day they start." Interestingly, the plan emphasizes the opportunities inside the firm for the lateral versus an emphasis on which clients of the lateral the firm can serve.

"We feel that offering opportunities with our clients for the lateral first builds trust," Fowler said. "We think it helps us start the relationship out on the right foot. It has the added benefit of helping us identify the work that the lateral can do while they are trying to port over their clients."

CHANGE IS GOOD



Several firms acknowledge their business development professionals as assets in selling the firm to laterals. But innovations in lateral recruiting include tapping outside expertise as well. Some firms are turning to outside consultants to re-engineer their recruiting program, solicit a third party's opinion on the portability of the candidate's client book, develop integration plans and hire business development coaches to work with laterals throughout the integration process.

This focus on lateral integration may be having the desired effect for both laterals and law firms. A 2014 Major, Lindsey & Africa survey of lateral partner satisfaction found a strong correlation between integration efforts and lateral satisfaction. Compared to the results of MLA's 1996 survey which found law firms were less than effective in four out of the five areas of integration, lateral partners now view their new firms as having been effective in integrating them along all five measurements of integration.

This column originally ran in The Recorder December 4th, 2014

Eric Dewey is managing principal of Group Dewey Consulting, focusing his practice on business development coaching and lateral acquisition support services. He writes the [Lawyer Up!](#) blog. He can be reached at eric@groupdeweyconsulting.com.

