

## Mentoring – An Advantage in Hiring and Retaining Employees?

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As we all know, identifying, hiring and retaining qualified staff is tough in the legal industry's competitive employment environment. Overall unemployment low and unemployment in skilled positions is even lower. This, together with the costs of hiring and training new employees, makes it essential to retain existing staff. Historically, employers have been in a buyers' market and have been able to retain employees by offering standard type benefits. The market has changed significantly over the last few years and employers find themselves trying to figure out how to retain their good employees. Feeling unappreciated has been cited as one of the major causes of employee turnover. An effective mentoring program can help us meet staff needs and provide an "edge" in hiring and retaining personnel.

Mentoring is a routine part of our everyday lives even though we may not recognize it as such. By establishing a program, firms can take advantage of and enhance the effectiveness of what we do naturally. A mentor is generally defined as a trusted counselor or teacher and is synonymous with being an authoritative and wise guide for others. Thus, the most important aspects of an effective mentoring program are identifying the best mentor(s) and matching them up with the right mentee(s). In most successful firms the best mentors are already in place and perceived as such by staff. The question is not if the person is in place, rather if the firm is using the mentor's talents to ensure everyone is on the same page as far as the business is concerned.

An effective mentoring program, like virtually all successful programs, requires an investment of time and effort by all involved parties. While there are no hard and fast rules as to how a mentoring program should be developed, one common theme is that it requires a one to one relationship between the mentor and mentee that goes beyond routine daily discussions. Depending on the size of the firm, the mentoring program can be managed by a single person or by a group. Often an obvious mentor for a particular employee is easily identifiable during the hiring process just by watching the interaction of the interviewers and interviewees. For existing employees, such relationships probably already exist and may simply need to become more of a process instead of an ad hoc occurrence. Ultimately, the effectiveness of such a program depends on the quality of the relationship between the mentor and the mentee.

An effective mentoring relationship requires time to build interest and trust, followed by ongoing periodic assessment meetings. Reporting results to firm management completes the cycle and provides a basis on which decisions can be made on how to better serve the mentee's and firm's needs. The program can stand alone or be combined with other personnel matters such as staff evaluations, pay changes, etc.

The mentor must establish a level of rapport and trust that provides the mentee with the expectation that the mentor can help with career progression, while understanding his or her personal interests and goals. It is important that the mentor have a "genuine and sincere" interest in the growth of the mentee personally and professionally. Just going through the motions without genuine interest could backfire by making the mentee feel unappreciated and unsure rather than needed and supported. You can build and strengthen relationships in a variety of ways ranging from taking time out of a busy schedule to talk about interests and family, having lunch together, etc. The key is to identify a mentor with common interests, background or goals to those of the mentee.

Once the relationship is established, it is important that the mentor and mentee have periodic, not necessarily structured, meetings in order to enhance the mentor's understanding of the mentee's interests and goals. A good mentor must also be a good listener. The progression of periodic meetings should ultimately end up in sessions that provide the staff with motivation, positive feedback on jobs well done, constructive criticism on the mentee's shortcomings, and guidance relative to expectations of the firm concerning the individual's goals and objectives.

There should be a process established for assimilating information for firm management. This helps management evaluate how to best match the desires and goals of the staff with the overall needs of the firm. Whatever form or method is used, it needs to be fair and consistent for all staff, not subject to the bias of particular mentor(s).

Effective mentoring provides a number of benefits for a firm. First and foremost, it ensures staff are working in a manner consistent with the firm's overall desires and direction. Second, it provides the firm with knowledge of the staff's goals and allows it to react to those needs, thereby increasing its ability to retain the employee long term. Third, the process provides management with tools and information that can be useful in determining future assignments, pay changes, promotions, and an assessment of the expected future of the respective staff. It is generally accepted that an effective mentoring program helps establish stronger commitment to the firm by its staff.

Mentoring provides significant benefits to staff. First, it provides a level of personal attention for their career development and personal growth. Second, it shows the mentee that the firm cares about their growth and development. Third, mentoring provides an atmosphere conducive to open discussions of desires, goals and concerns, building stronger rapport, leading to a higher level of commitment and satisfaction for the mentee. Further, it provides constant feedback with respect to assignments and career progress and provides a forum for understanding what is expected of them.

In conclusion, an effective mentoring program should enhance the employer-employee relationship, provide better information to both parties in order to ensure the goals and objectives are met, and establish a basis for evaluating and directing our most valued asset, our people, in a manner that is consistent with the overall objectives of the firm. Through the mentoring process, we build long term relationships that go well beyond the business at hand. Mentors receive satisfaction in watching a mentee grow professionally and personally. Mentees receive a better understanding of expectations placed on them and of their role in the growth of the firm. Overall communication and problem solving is more timely and effective. Further, mentoring provides an avenue for passing down the firm's history and culture to the next generation of its leaders, which is a great investment in the future.