

# Managing

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## Retaining Your Firm's Greatest Assets

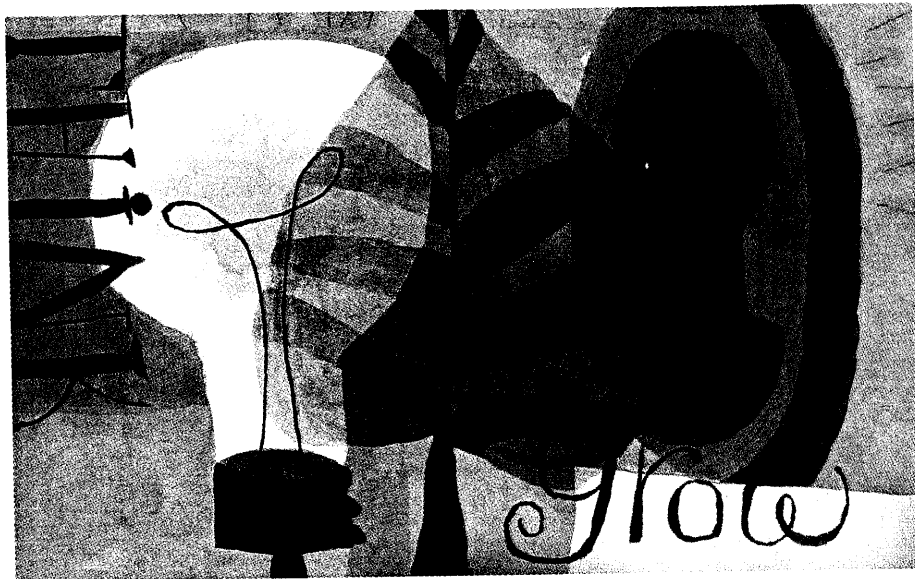
**R**ecently, a friend of mine told me that his firm had just hired a new associate. The interesting thing is that it granted the associate's request for an 80 percent schedule, even though it had been looking to hire a full-time lawyer.

Why would the firm agree to such a proposal? It did so not only because the associate had the prerequisite skills and expertise, but also because it was very impressed with how he planned to use the other 20 percent of his time—volunteering at an international organization contributing to the development of third-world countries. "This is a win-win situation," said my friend, who is on the firm's management committee. "It's good for us and gives something to the greater good."

The heads of this firm gained a talented individual because of their willingness to look at the situation in a flexible way. And that's the type of approach that also helps a firm hold on to its most important assets—its people.

### Don't Underestimate Their Needs—Or You'll Face the Consequences

Attracting and retaining good employees takes creativity and flexibility on the part of a firm, as well as those who supervise the individuals. These days, many in management believe that, given the current economic climate, talented employees simply will not leave, no matter what the situation. But those managers are underrating the



strength of an individual's need for workplace satisfaction. A down economy does not keep employees from looking for—and finding—other options that fit their values, professional desires and work-life goals. And that's particularly true of Generation X-ers, who make up most of today's associate ranks.

Why is retention so important? For one thing, studies show that the cost of replacing a professional-level employee is between 110 to 200 percent of the individual's annual salary. This can be very expensive to an employer, especially if there is repeat turnover in a particular group or the firm as a whole.

But it's more than just the money. Turnover leads to reduced morale and productivity in the remaining staff, and it makes it difficult to attract the kind of new people you want to

employ. Creating an environment in which retaining valued employees is the rule, and not the exception, is just plain good business.

### Why Do Employees Want to Stay?

What factors influence individuals to stick with their current positions? Most managers think that the top answer is money—a belief that has led to the loss of many a talented employee. Actually, money is pretty far down the list for most individuals, including lawyers. Here are the most frequent reasons that people stay in their jobs, as reported by Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans in *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay*:

- Career growth and professional development
- Exciting and challenging work

- Meaningful work, making a difference and a contribution
- Great people
- Being part of a team
- Good boss
- Recognition for work well-done
- Fun on the job
- Autonomy, sense of control over work
- Flexibility, in, for example, work hours and dress code
- Fair pay and benefits
- Inspiring leadership
- Pride in the organization, its mission and quality of product
- Great work environment
- Location
- Job security
- Family-friendliness

Notice how far down the list “pay and benefits” appear. Then notice how far up the list “good boss” appears!

Managers frequently underestimate their value in retaining employees. But you do have tremendous impact in that regard. Gone are the days when an employee stays with an organization because of loyalty to the organization itself. The loyalty is now given to the employee’s boss—but only when it is earned.

When a supervisor takes the time to consider the needs and desires of his or her staff, the supervisor is often rewarded with motivated and productive workers who don’t need to look for satisfaction outside of their current workplace. That reward, in turn, is invaluable to the entire firm. A law firm’s “human resources” are what make the firm competitive and strong, particularly in a difficult marketplace.

### Concrete Steps You Can Take to Improve Retention

You’re clear on the fact that retention is important. What is your next step?

Start by meeting one on one with each member of your team. In your individual meetings, let each person know that he or she is a valued part of the team and you would like to make sure he or she is satisfied with work and the firm’s environment.

Now, here’s the most important part: Ask if there is anything you can do to increase the individual’s current career satisfaction. Many supervisors are afraid to ask this question because they fear that employees will make unreasonable requests, or will ask for something not in the supervisor’s control.

Most employees, however, are quite reasonable people. They understand the realities of the workplace. But all too often, unfortunately, supervisors don’t take a creative look at how they can increase their employees’ job satisfaction. Many, for example, respond to employee requests by saying, “We’ve never done it that way before and, therefore, we can’t now.” If that tends to be your response, try instead, “Let’s see how we can work this out.”

Making sure that someone is getting the kind of projects she wants, or allowing someone to change work hours so he can better meet the demands of home life, can make all the difference in the world to an employee. And it may very well be the difference between retaining versus losing a valued member of your team.

### How About Some Ingenuity?

Your firm can create win-win situations just like my friend’s firm did. It simply takes a bit of ingenuity, a willingness to keep an open mind and the desire to help all members of your team be as satisfied as possible in their work. Those factors will go a long way toward ensuring that your firm keeps its greatest assets—the people who work there. ■

## Action Plan

- Determine what turnover costs your firm—in replacement, retraining and morale.
- Learn what prospective hires expect and desire in their work at your firm.
- Meet with each member of your team and ask how the firm might increase their career satisfaction.
- Learn more about the process from these helpful resources:

*Attorney Recruitment and Retention: A Showcase of Best Practices.* National Association for Law Placement, 1996.

*Keeping Good Lawyers: Best Practices to Create Career Satisfaction* by M. Diane Vogt and Lori-Ann Rickard. ABA, 2000.

*The Lateral Lawyer: Why They Leave and What May Make Them Stay.* NALP Foundation for Research & Education, 2001.

*Love ‘Em or Lose ‘Em: Getting Good People to Stay* by Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans. Berrett-Koehler, 1999.

*Recruiting Lawyers: How to Hire the Best Talent* by Marcia Pennington Shannon and Susan G. Manch. ABA, 2000.



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