

Managing

Welcoming Your New Associate to the Firm

MARCIA PENNINGTON SHANNON | You and the others in your firm are incredibly busy. Fortunately, you've finally hired that new associate you need and feel a real sense of relief that the new lawyer will be starting soon.

You approached the hiring process systematically, thinking through the skills and experience needed for this position, as well as the type of personality that would work well with you and others in the firm. You wrote a great ad, culled through dozens of resumes, and selected several candidates to interview. You brilliantly thought out the interview questions, so you would get at the real information needed to make an informed decision. Lastly, you made the offer, negotiating a win-win—and the person accepted. Yes! Your work is done.

Now all you have to do is wait for the associate to get to the office and dive into the job. Wrong.

If you want the newcomer to start off on the right foot, your work is not complete—it has just begun. But the time and effort you put into thinking through the integration and adjust-

ment period will pay dividends in a short time. It *is* worth the effort.

How to Start Off Right: Give Me a Break

To begin with, is your new hire already working at another job? If so, suggest that he or she take at least one week in between leaving the old position and starting the next one with you. Yes, you need the help immediately. Actually, you needed it a couple of months ago.... But no one starts with much energy if they end one position on Friday and begin the next one on Monday.

By making sure the newcomer takes those few extra days to transition, you'll be rewarded with a person who can immediately be present for you—not someone with one foot in the old place and one foot in yours or, worse yet, who's completely exhausted and unable to adapt quickly to the new environment. Starting a new job takes energy.

Having agreed to grant your new associate a period of time in between jobs, take care to note that this is *not* an opportunity to send the new person manuals to read or case files to review. This person is not on your

payroll yet and, therefore, should not be put in the position of starting work before having actually started work! (This is something that happens quite often and, as you can imagine, makes associates wonder if they have made the right choice in employers.)

What you want to send *instead* of work is a brief note or e-mail, expressing how much you're looking forward to the person joining your practice. The note can also mention the names of individuals he or she will meet on the first day. This is a great way to make the person feel welcomed from the get-go.

Setting the Stage: Advance Planning

There are numerous things you can do to make sure the associate's first day begins with a feeling of excitement and engagement. Consider some of the following issues before the person starts.

The office. Make sure the person's office is fully furnished and appropriate equipment and supplies are in place, so the associate can start feeling settled immediately. Also, adding a small "welcome" plant to make the space less austere is a small but powerful touch.

Secretarial assistance. If this person will be assigned a specific secretary, be sure to alert the secretary to the newcomer's start date and potential responsibilities. The secretary can create an outline of



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items to review with the new lawyer, so they can both begin to focus on getting systems organized and learning to work together.

Administrative issues. The newcomer will have to complete administrative forms, sign up for retirement and health plans, and learn about such things as how to use the firm's computer system, office card keys and photocopier and fax machines. A tour of the library and an orientation to its organization will also be extremely helpful. Assign to appropriate people the task of orienting the new hire on these matters. Any orientation materials that can be put in writing will ensure a faster acclimation.

Billing and case file systems. Even if the new hire has been practicing law someplace else, don't assume that he or she understands how all *your* practice-related systems work. In fact, it's likely that the systems learned before are different from yours. Plan to take time out to explain expectations and how each system (such as billing, timekeeping and case management) works in your firm.

The First Day Arrives: Talk Supervisory Style

Your new associate is starting—*hurray*. You have planned his or her first day, including orientations and lunch with you or some of the others in the firm. You've also invited the newcomer to ask questions as he or she gets settled in. But take a more proactive role by checking in on the person during that first day *and* throughout the first week to make sure she or he is acclimating well to the new environment.

Your associate may initially be shy about asking questions, but with

your encouragement to do so, much time can be saved—and often mistakes, too.

You also need to sit down and have a one-on-one conversation to orient the new associate to your supervisory style. The best way to start off on the right foot is to give the person a chance to get to know you and your preferences. By educating your associate on your preferred style of assistance, including how you approach assignments, research, writing projects and the like, you are helping the person learn to work for and be of the utmost help to you. There is nothing more important than this conversation when it comes to creating a solid relationship between the two of you.

If there are other partners with whom this associate will be working, those partners should orient the newcomer to their supervisory styles and desires as well.

You Are Earning Loyalty

Many believe that associates' loyalty to their firms is at an all-time low. But what many don't realize is that loyalty is *earned*. Acting as if a new associate is just a cog in the wheel, or a fungible billing unit, sends the message that the individual can be easily replaced—and that creates the impression that you are not an employer that appreciates the contributions your people make. This is far from a good way to earn loyalty *or* get good buzz in recruiting circles.

Creating orientations, taking time to talk with new associates to make sure they're adjusting well, helping them see that they're necessary members of your team, and treating them with respect encourages goodwill and commitment from the very first day. **LP**

Action Plan

- Recognize that once you've hired your new associate, your work has just begun. Commit to helping the individual adjust and integrate into your practice.
- In advance of the associate's start date, assign responsibility for orienting the new person to things such as the library's organization; use of computer, fax, postal, photocopier and other equipment; and the specifics of your time, billing and case management systems.
- Encourage those who are conducting various parts of the orientation to create written materials to accompany their training talks.
- Ask the associate's new secretary to play an integral part during the first week so that the two can learn to work together from the very beginning.
- Explain to the new associate your supervisory style and how you like to have things done. Too often partners expect their associates to be mind readers and are disappointed when associates are not clairvoyant.
- Learn more by reading:
 - 100 Plus Pointers for New Lawyers on Adjusting to Your Job* by Sharon Meit Abrahams. ABA, 2004.
 - Best Practices in Attorney Professional Development* by the Professional Development Consortium. ABA, 2004.
 - Keeping Good Lawyers: Best Practices to Create Career Satisfaction* by M. Diane Vogt and Lori-Ann Rickard. ABA, 2000.