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Slaughter and May is the ultimate finishing school

Law firms can make a virtue of an increasingly mobile workforce by ensuring their ambassadors outweigh the detractors, writes Tony Williams

By *Tony Williams*



In an era where lawyers (and indeed all employees) view their careers in terms of three, five or at most 10-year episodes, law firms need to understand how to cope with and make a virtue of an increasingly mobile workforce. Shutterstock

Increasingly partners also fall into this group and may not necessarily see the appointment to partnership as a long-term commitment to the firm.

In this context law firms have to address three issues.

First, what does the firm claim the deal is for its people? What does the firm offer its people and what does it want in return? This will include pay and benefits, variety of work, level of training, support and mentoring, flexible and hybrid working, client contact, effective and timely delegation, culture, work ethic and work-life balance. In short, why should people come to work for the firm and how will they be treated?

There is one thing worse than not articulating the deal clearly and that is not consistently delivering it and being seen to deliver it across the firm. This means addressing issues, especially those involving partner behaviour, that are inconsistent with the deal. Different firms will and should have different deals. They just need to be clear what their deal is.

Second, the firm needs to ensure that consistent with its deal its people feel that they were treated fairly, that they stay with the firm as long as possible before deciding to leave and when they leave, they go feeling that the firm delivered its side of the bargain.

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Third, the firm and each partner needs to understand that most people who leave will do so as ambassadors for the firm or detractors. It is usually a binary outcome. This view of the firm will be set for the rest of their lives and will influence their interactions with

potential employees or clients for decades to come. This is potentially a massive group of market influencers that will have a major impact on the firm's brand.

It is no coincidence that virtually every lawyer who ever worked at Slaughter and May mentions that fact within 10 minutes of meeting you. It is the ultimate legal finishing school and the chance of achieving partnership is vanishingly small but the training is first class and those who leave are proud that they spent part of their career there. The ambassadors far outweigh the detractors.

Even people who leave under difficult circumstances such as redundancy can become ambassadors if they believe the process was fair.

Firms can enhance the likelihood of creating ambassadors by having an open and constructive exit interview regime and by maintaining an effective alumni programme. An alumni programme is about celebrating the fact that the alumni spent part of their career in the firm, noting their success thereafter (even if in a competitor) and creating a forum for former colleagues and the firm to maintain contact.

For those firms that 'deliver what it says on the tin' and treat their people fairly the likelihood of creating ambassadors is greatly enhanced. As in so many areas, doing the right thing is also good business.

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