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LAW FIRM PARTNERSHIP & BENEFITS REPORT

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Exit Interviews and Your Firm's Culture

By Sharon Meit Abrahams

Research has shown that it costs around \$300,000 to bring in and train new attorneys. That's an expensive investment and one worth preserving. Through the process of conducting exit interviews with the good attorneys who have left, along with those the firm has asked to leave, you can gather intel about your firm's culture. The business justification for doing exit interviews is to learn about and improve systematic organizational or interpersonal issues that may be adversely impacting your firm's culture.

Feedback from the interviews can drive structural changes, changes in procedures — and possibly even affect personnel. To enable the firm to effectively utilize the feedback gathered, the exit interviews need to be conducted in an organized and well planned manner.

How to Begin

To begin, determine what information you want and then the best way to collect it. The first, and least beneficial, is a written questionnaire or survey that covers qualitative data in a quantitative manner. This works for specific closed-ended questions regarding benefits, supervisors, and similar easy-to-grade topics. Survey questions should be crafted in a way that asks one variable, in order to ensure clear interpretation of the question. For example, 1) Good question, single variable: Did your supervising attorney give you performance feedback? 2) Bad question, multiple variables: Did your supervising attorney give you performance feedback throughout the year and for your annual review?

There are many online resources to leverage to determine question topics and styles for a survey. Additionally, keeping it as short as possible while still receiving the information you need will boost departing attorney's participation. A best practice would be to keep the written survey short, and complement it with a personal interview to gather more context and anecdotes.

Why Bother?

While a one-on-one exit interview is time-consuming, it does have a higher payoff. If the right person conducts the interview, your firm will garner data and information that truly can help drive improvements. Think about who your attorneys would most likely respond honestly to during this transition. Review your firm's organizational structure and determine if it should be a variety of individuals or just one person. Consider someone at the local office level or at the department/practice area level as the interviewer.

The Process

When conducting a one-on-one interview, start with light discussion to help your departing attorney feel comfortable answering your questions. Assure the attorney that no negative consequences will result from honest discussion during the exit interview. Even though they are leaving the firm, departing attorneys might hesitate to answer the questions honestly.

Conduct the interviews in person. You can always get a better feel for a person when you are directly in front of them. It is easier to read their body language so you can pick up non-verbal cues if you have touched a nerve or hit on a sensitive topic. In today's global world, you might only be able to do this from a distance. In this case, a video conference would be best so you can still see the attorney. Finally, the telephone is better than not at all.

Develop a standardized list of questions that each interviewer would follow so the answers can later be aligned by topic. The conversations may digress from the original questions, but at least it will make it easier to assemble the data if everyone starts with the same set of core questions. The purpose of this line of questioning is to uncover the root cause of departure. If you use these four basic topics, you will be able to synthesize the data into themes.

- Why are you leaving and where are you going?
- What did we do well (as a firm, office, department, etc.)?
- What could we have done better?
- Anything else we need to talk about?
- Open the conversation with questions like:
 - What has led you to this decision?
 - Have you felt like leaving for some time or is this recent?
 - Did you talk to anyone at the firm before you made this decision?
 - Were there things happening at work that made you unhappy?
 - Did you feel your issues were being addressed?
 - Did you actively look for a new position or did a headhunter contact you?

Develop a different line of questions for partners and associates, as they may have different attitudes about their careers and experiences at the firm. For example, you can focus questions around career advancement for associates and around rainmaking for partners or questions about origination credits for partners and training for associates. Examine your firm's culture, policies and procedures to determine the types of questions to ask.

Using the Data

Once you have collected all the data, you will need to report the results to the proper people at your firm. If you used an electronic survey that has followed a standardized format year over year, then the most straightforward option would be to compile the data and show changes from year to year. When analyzing the notes from the one-on-one interviews, themes will emerge. Outlining themes gathered from the interviews is the first step to analyzing qualitative data. Each set of notes must be read, and sometimes reread, in order to quantify how many times an issue or person is mentioned.

Determining who will receive the report is tied to your firm's culture. Should the report go to only the leaders of areas, offices or departments that have been identified to have a problem or should it go to the firm leaders? When there are issues that are tied to the business side of the firm and not the practice side, share this information with the COO or equivalent.

Exit interviews have the power to uncover your firm's true culture. Exit interview information is a significant first step in ensuring that leaders are informed about what is happening in their firm.

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