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A record number of Americans left the workforce in 2021 in a movement that became known as “The Great Resignation.” An estimated 47 million workers left over COVID concerns, retired early, or reassessed priorities and lifestyle. Now a different trend is emerging as a new study shows “The Great Resignation” is giving way to “The Great Regret.”

80% of professionals who left their jobs now report they regret their decision according to a new Paychex study. While attention to mental health and work-life balance was at the heart of the Great Resignation, only half of respondents said they are satisfied with improvements in these areas in their new workplace. Additionally, only 11% of the currently employed respondents said they are more satisfied with their new salaries than previous ones.

While these statistics do not directly correspond to law firm professionals, they do emphasize the need for law firm leadership to answer the question:

“What do firms do to develop, value and retain talent?”

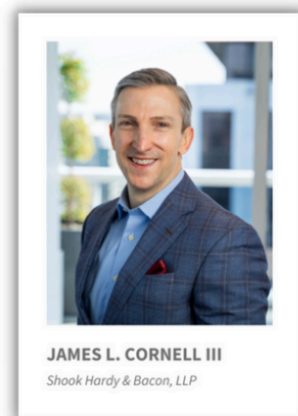
It is my opinion that successful firms invest in their people so they feel invested in the firm, and professional development of their workers is the only way to truly do this. As this new study shows, paying employees more money does not demonstrate investment nor does providing a flexible or hybrid work schedule. When a firm is helping get its people to the next level through skill and leadership development, then those are the workers that become loyal to the firm and in return, invest in the organization. Additionally, these employees do not job hop when a recruiter cold calls them or the firm down the street offers a higher salary.

Dr. Sharon Abrahams, founder of Legal Talent Development and career trainer of law firm personnel, said in 2022, “that professional and talent development was the antidote for the Great Resignation”. I asked Dr. Abrahams what she included under the umbrella of professional development. The list was extensive and inclusive of specific job skill training, soft skill training, mentoring, sponsorship, coaching, continuing legal education, and even performance reviews. The latter when conducted properly can reveal what areas need to be focused on or improved in employees, thus providing a roadmap for professional development.

80% of professionals regret leaving their jobs during "The Great Resignation" according to new report

Professional development doesn't just benefit employees though. It also has immense upside to employers including increasing competency, efficiency, identifying employees who have unrealized potential, bearing out who your top performers may be, and perhaps even more importantly, those that may not be a good fit and ultimately unsuccessful in your organization. Each of these are vitally important as firms compete for next generation employees, leaders and rainmakers so their organizations can continue to meet and exceed client expectations for service and results.

Professional development of employees also positively impacts other important areas in firms including culture and leadership development. This is an additional competitive advantage for firms that develop career pathways for employees as position progression in the legal industry is often times limited, especially when compared to the job ladders we see in Corporate America.



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Culture. Peter Drucker, the father of modern management theory, believed that “*culture eats strategy for breakfast*”. In our legal organizations, culture is often the key to success, efficiency and ultimately the well-being of the firm as strategy can fall by the wayside when the people executing it are apathetic to their jobs and firms. When firms have a culture that is collaborative, competency based and in pursuit of continuous learning, employees tend to not be afraid of challenges, seek opportunities for improvement and leverage technology to be competitive. This approach keeps them engaged and invested, and where those two qualities exist apathy does not.

Firms without a culture of investment, improvement and development may have to scramble to develop and nurture that type of environment so their employees are less susceptible for opportunities to jump ship.

Leadership Development. Leadership development within a firm is another tremendous way to create loyalty and longevity with employees. Investing in coaching, skill development and mentorship to assist an associate with the transition to income partner creates loyalty. Or helping a legal administrative assistant acquire the skills needed to move into a paralegal position engenders long-term commitment in the firm.

The Harris Poll found that 80% of employees prioritize opportunities for continuous learning, while a research poll from LinkedIn Learning noted a whopping 94% of employees surveyed said they would stay longer at a company that invests in more employee learning and professional development.

Ensuring that the firm’s next generation of attorney and professional staff leaders are prepared, skilled and set up for success maintains stability and smooth operation of the organization internally as well as externally with clients.



At Shook, Hardy & Bacon, our management team implemented a Legal Administrative Assistant (LAA) Development Program that helps our LAAs develop new technical skill proficiencies, improve performance, share knowledge, evolve processes and learn leadership skills through formal training and peer mentoring. As LAAs progress through the program, they become eligible to earn more income, take on more substantive and complex work and participate in task forces, trial teams and committees across the firm. Additionally, this upskilling prepares them for promotion into other roles in the firm should they desire to progress beyond the LAA position.

All of this creates a highly engaged and competent group of employees that stay with the firm as they grow in their careers. And as a person involved in the hiring of LAAs for a number of our offices, I see this as an advantage the firm has in the recruiting process when we are competing with other law firms for human capital.

Firms that recognize that helping employees identify their career paths – both individually and within the firm – and even change their roles over time can achieve employee satisfaction, retention and longevity. And firms that take an active role in career pathing and progression are at a competitive advantage in recruiting, developing and retaining their most valuable assets.

Firm Cost. If the retention aspect of professional development isn’t a convincing enough case for investing in employees, consider that the cost of losing an associate attorney can be between \$200,000 and \$500,000 in lost productivity and hard costs. The average attrition rate for associates in AmLaw 100 firms is now approximately 25% of those that join the firm. This means that in 5 years some firms risk losing 125% of their associates. This is a great deviation from the largely accepted pre-pandemic attrition metric of 50%. Losses of this nature leave firms with gaps in their attorney ranks and severely impact their future growth. Retaining these associates ensures revenue preservation, expense savings and firm stability factors, even if these associates ultimately change positions within the firm or go off partner track.

**\$200,000 -
\$500,000**
Average cost of losing an associate attorney in lost productivity and hard costs

On the administrative side of firms, the departure of an office administrator can cost a firm 50 – 75% of that employee’s annual salary while also having an impact on office operations, culture promotion and preservation, and overall productivity. For law firms to stay competitive and fully staffed, they need to make sure they are giving their employees the reasons most important to them for staying.

Viewing “The Great Resignation” through the new lens of “The Great Regret” underscores the idea that workers want jobs that provide professional fulfillment, opportunities for advancement and a culture of growth. Adam Grant, organizational psychologist at the Wharton School of Business, University of Pennsylvania says, “Exit interviews are too late to start the conversation about why people are leaving. We should be doing *entry interviews* to find out why an employee joined, and *stay interviews* to figure out how to keep them.”

Recruiting, empowering and keeping employees through professional development is exactly the type of upgrade that law firms and the legal industry need to keep pace with the clients they serve.



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James L. Cornell leverages 20-plus years of management and leadership experience in law firms, along with service as a volunteer leader and Past President with the Association of Legal Administrators (ALA) to bring together the holistic perspective of today's legal management professional and the business of law. James focuses on communication, collaboration, leadership, vision, and creative solution-generation to address the administrative and operational challenges of modern legal organizations. James is a Successful Firm Project leadership advisory board member and has the privilege of being the Office Administrator for Shook, Hardy & Bacon, LLP in their Washington, D.C. and Boston offices, and can be reached at (202) 210.5321, jcornell@shb.com or via [Linkedin](#).