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MARKETING THE LAW FIRM

AUGUST 2018

Professional Development: Firm Culture As Your Competitive Recruiting and Engagement Advantage

By Sharon Meit Abrahams

Annually, for the past 20 years, I visit a variety of law schools to speak to students about interviewing skills for on campus recruiting and how to make a great first impression during a summer program. It is an honor to help these budding attorneys prepare for the beginning of their careers. Notably, I appreciate the conversations when I have the opportunity to discuss the importance of selecting not only a great firm, but a firm that is the right choice for them as individuals.

One of the key things I advise new attorneys is to find a firm that fits their personal values and has a culture in which they will thrive. As A. Harrison Barnes, Esq writes in an article, "... an attorney's happiness and success in the practice of law have more to do with a particular law firm culture (which is sometimes also referred to as the 'personality of a firm') than with any other factor." I couldn't agree more. These future attorneys are seeking the right place to launch their careers; therefore, by promoting your firm's unique culture, you can more effectively attract and retain the best talent for your firm.

There are many definitions to "culture." In a [Harvard Business Review article](#), John Coleman describes the six components of a great corporate culture as vision, values, practices, people, narrative and place. While it's easy to observe components of culture such as people, practices and place, it's more difficult to see the intangibles such as values, vision and narrative. Arguably, the intangibles are the important factors for candidates to understand as these are what will drive that individual's success.

While culture includes the values of a firm, it does not include the values written on a poster or webpage. It includes the real values attorneys feel. It is the assumptions attorneys make when making decisions. It is the history they have experienced. It's the real behaviors that fuel the firm's success and serves as a competitive advantage. This is what your candidates want to understand during the recruiting process.

More often these days, attorneys are hunting for firms with clearly defined cultures that map to their personal values. In the Yale Law School report, "[Assessing Law Firms: Culture, Clients, Compensation and Beyond](#)," the authors' advice to the law students is: "If you want to maximize your

chances of securing employment with a law firm best suited to your personality, work style and practice interests, you cannot cut corners by relying upon someone else's definition of prestige." The report goes on to state: "Simply because a firm ranks #1 on the AmLaw 100 list (for example), does not necessarily make it a better place for YOU to work than a firm that isn't even on the list."

The best way to find candidates that fit your culture is to showcase your culture front and center in your recruiting efforts. LinkedIn's "[2015 Global Recruiting Trends Study](#)" listed effective employer brand messaging that focuses specifically on culture and career growth as a top trend. Its [2018 study](#) follows up with a discussion about how a diverse culture can lead to more diverse recruits. Law firm recruiting companies and firm HR departments are beginning to develop strategies that highlight firms holistically, instead of solely on the specific job description.

Even before an initial meeting or job interview, candidates scan a firm's online presence. A website is a key starting point, but so is a blog, LinkedIn page, Twitter feed, VAULT, etc. The content included can propel a firm to the top of a short list if it aligns with the candidate's values, or remove it completely. Similarly, potential candidates are constantly gathering information from a firm's interactions with them.

For example, if "great service" is a key cultural value of a firm, then your candidates need to experience great service during the recruiting process.

In a competitive job market, the way firms are represented online and in initial meetings can play a huge part in whether a candidate chooses to join your firm. Further, it can also set the tone for the future success of your relationship with that individual. It is one thing to tout all the great things you think a candidate wants to hear about your firm during the recruiting process. It is another to be honest about what makes your culture unique. Authenticity is the magic component in keeping talent engaged once they are in the door.

Is your firm setting the right expectations with your candidates in the way your culture is marketed? In Jordan Furlong's example of a stated cultural value, called "Consideration for Clients," he notes that it means "displaying a genuine interest in, affection for and devotion to the overall welfare of the firm's clients." Many attorneys would resonate with that stated value, wanting to help their clients.

However, any instance when that value is not upheld could detract from those attorneys' desire to work hard for the firm. Denise Lee Yohn, in her 2017 [Harvard Business Review article](#), "Why Your Company Culture Should Match Your Brand," points out "how you operate on the inside should be inextricably linked with how you want to be perceived on the outside." When the right expectations are set, you can unlock greater overall engagement.

Let's look at this situation: Julie is a mid-level attorney interested in making a lateral move to a bigger law firm. Julie does her research online and pays close attention to what she learns during her interviews, which is that it is a very collaborative culture with many growth opportunities. Soon after joining the firm, she realizes that she was misled. While her colleagues are friendly, she learns that individual performance is what is recognized by leaders and collaboration is nowhere to be found. Now Julie is upset and wishes she stayed at her former firm. Emphasizing individual performance is not a negative aspect to the culture, it just was not the right fit for Julie. Ideally, this experience could have been avoided with greater authenticity in the recruiting process.

Firm culture has the power to attract and retain candidates if portrayed effectively and authentically. Effective and authentic go hand in hand. James Leipold, the Executive Director, of the National Association for Law Placement (NALP) says they have not seen law firms put their culture front and center in the recruiting process. In fact, he notes that: "Law firm recruiting hasn't really changed in the past 30 years."

The time is now to harness the power your firm's real values and make culture your competitive advantage.

Dr. Sharon Meit Abrahams, a member of the Board of Editors of this newsletter, is a legal talent-development expert helping lawyers improve their performance, productivity and profitability.

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