



Staying the Course

Conducting stay interviews can help you better understand and retain your best talent.



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Exit interviews have long been used to determine why employees leave organizations. That feedback can be valuable, but the window to prevent losing that person has already closed. Now, a developing practice aims to discover what factors contribute to a talented employee's satisfaction level and that person's decision to stay with the organization.

Considering the potential return on investment and the competitive advantage of retaining the most talented professionals, it's important for law firm leaders to understand how and why stay interviews should be included in a law firm's suite of operational tools. Human resources plays a significant role in adopting this strategy — although managers ultimately hold the key to impact talent retention within their firms.

Many HR and engagement experts believe stay interviews, when done effectively, can make a significant impact on employee engagement and retention. In an interview with *HR Executive* magazine, renowned author and speaker Beverly Kaye stated that stay interviews can provide valuable information that can significantly lessen the likelihood an exit interview will occur.

"I have thought about the concept of stay interviews and how they could be an integral part of an engagement and retention strategy. What I really focused on is the role it could play

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in the primary challenge, which is engagement," says Patti Lane, CLM, Chief Human Resources Officer at Hooper, Lundy & Bookman, P.C. in Los Angeles.

Research backs this up. In fact, a 2015 Gallup poll revealed that 50.8 percent of all employees are disengaged, with an additional 17.2 percent actively disengaged. Disengaged employees are operating at less than their full capacity and those actively disengaged are currently looking for another job.

"To me, worse than losing top talent when they are truly at the top, is having people who once were top performers, but for a number of reasons, become disengaged — and stay," says Lane.

HOW HR CAN HELP

Developing an effective, integrated engagement strategy requires leadership, skillful collaboration, influence and thoughtful input from stakeholders across the firm. To be effective, this engagement strategy needs top-down support and buy-in across the organization. But in today's employment climate, where firms compete for talented people to propel their businesses forward, it is more important than ever to be intentional in your engagement strategy.

Most law firms have a plethora of benefits, perks and policies developed over time to attract and retain talent. Yet, as technology, personal priorities and professional roles have evolved, have those benefits evolved along with them? Now is a great time to identify the menu of "extras" that make your culture unique, and ask yourself the following:

- Are they still serving the purpose for which they were intended?
- Are you packaging them together into an employer brand that resonates with your people and differentiates you in the marketplace?
- Have there been adjustments to meet changing times and priorities within today's society?

When you boil the process down to its simplest form, it's about talking to your people and, more importantly, *listening* to what they say. For HR, conducting focus groups or structured stay interviews with key associates or staff members can be an effective way of collecting data to

support what is and is not working within your current engagement strategy. As ambassadors of this feedback, HR can and should participate either directly or indirectly in those conversations.

It's also part of HR's responsibility to ensure the effectiveness of hiring and retention practices across the organization. Tracking the true cost of turnover, and using this data to educate leaders on the financial ramifications of attrition is critical for HR to obtain the support they need to truly lead this effort. If HR recognizes stay interviews as an engagement best practice, models them within their own department, and encourages other leaders to embrace them, then stay interviews can become an established and ongoing component of the firm's culture.

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"Excellent lawyers and highly competent staff choose to come here because we invest upfront in the hiring process to ensure we are hiring for capabilities and for culture fit," says HR Director Marianne Monagle of Goulston & Storrs P.C. in Boston. "We have to deliver on our promise that the culture and experience they get from practicing and working here is different." To that end, Monagle says they invest in people for the long-term, so having those conversations on a regular basis is important — especially with high performers and high potentials.

MANAGERS: TAKE NOTE

For stay interviews to be effective, the buy-in must reach beyond HR to the managers who are leading these discussions. Without an understanding of the value — and a willingness to truly hear their employees' feedback — interviews can easily become another "required HR process" lacking the necessary traction to take hold.

In his 2010 book, *Rethinking Retention in Good Times and Bad*, author Richard Finnegan cites a report released by Yahoo HotJobs! where more than half of all respondents agreed with the following statement: “People don’t leave companies, they leave managers.” Finnegan further clarifies this key retention concept, suggesting the following: “Employees join for things but stay or leave for people.”

Stay interviews provide an ideal environment in which to develop these connections. What you learn from these conversations is essential to cultivating a deeper, meaningful and lasting relationship with your employees.

“As managers, it is our most important responsibility to engage and develop our staff,” says Lori Kennedy, PHR, SHRM-CP, Manager, Talent Acquisition at Venable LLP in Baltimore. “In today’s candidate market, if we do not provide this type of environment, our top talent will seek opportunities with firms and companies that will.”

As managers and leaders of people, the greatest gift you can give your firm and most significant contribution you can make to retain top talent, is to develop a relationship with the people who report to you. No other work relationship holds more importance, impact or influence with an employee.

For example, an employee shares with you that she really enjoyed a recent project and would like more opportunities for that kind of work. As the manager, you can coach her on ways to earn similar projects and involve her in future opportunities that she may find interesting. When you follow through, you send a message that you listened and care.

Alternatively, if your employee decides to leave to work for a competitor where she can do more of that specific work she told you she really enjoyed but doesn’t have access to in her current position, then the manager has some responsibility in that employee’s decision to leave.

Of course, you will not always be in a position to say “yes.” However, this type of ongoing feedback loop provides an environment where you can explain why not, or why not now. “Oftentimes, staff will come to me with suggestions and ideas that they have carefully considered to solve a problem, create a better process or merely be more effective. I’m looking forward to making this concept part of my strategy and tap into their insight and, in the process, keep them engaged,” says Lane.

There are numerous digital resources that outline the top questions managers should ask in a stay interview. A Google search of “stay interview questions” turns up dozens of viable results. These resources may help you personalize and develop questions to ask your direct reports and to gain a better understanding of the differing views on the topic. Managers can adapt these questions to their own style and customize their application to appropriately reflect the individual relationship with each direct report.

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ENGAGING EMPLOYEES

On their own, formal stay interviews can only accomplish so much to drive retention. However, integrating this practice into ongoing career conversations with your employees where you seek to understand their needs, motivations and career objectives can define your culture and significantly impact employee satisfaction — and, ultimately, retention.

“In the absence of a formal stay interview program, which may not align with every firm’s culture, I believe it is important that human resources professionals coach managers to regularly engage their employees regarding performance and development,” says Kennedy. This process not only benefits the direct report, but managers who cultivate relationships with their direct reports and utilize these concepts will achieve an added reward — their own elevated engagement and sense of purpose. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carol Crawford was a member of ALA for 20-plus years during the time she led the HR function within law firms. As a Managing Director at Calibrate Legal, she advises law firms on talent engagement and leadership development strategies as well as places top talent in law firm leadership roles.



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