

Business & Careers

Don't ignore the warning signs of a new hire

End the relationship before more damage can be done



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The euphoria of stealing away the star partner from a key competitor often creates tunnel vision about their performance. Firm leaders often develop an almost willful blindness to the key warning signs of trouble ahead.

Here are four of the most common signs your latest lateral hire may not be working out as planned, and how to avoid the most likely pitfalls:

Not respecting time

In an attempt to see new employees in the most positive light possible, one common oversight is ignoring warning signs that your latest lawyer is not respectful of time. This can take a number of forms, including using vacation time within a few months of commencing (where such vacation was not discussed prior to the hire), unannounced absences, coming in late, leaving early, missing team meetings, etc. While employers often want to give the new hire the benefit of the doubt, our experience has consistently been that these warning signs need to be tackled immediately; otherwise they can

start to impact the attitude and sense of team within the broader group. This is not to suggest a 'clock watching' approach to new hires; however, it is important to recognize when you are ignoring warning signs of a future problem and not taking steps to remedy them.

Resistance to change

Another area where law firms often fail to curtail problematic hires is when the new lawyer is strongly resistant to the firm's practice methods. While a new hire represents a great opportunity to learn the best practices of a competitor firm, recognize there has also been significant time and effort invested in determining your own firm's existing best practices. Again, in an attempt to see lateral recruits in the best possible light, firms often fail to rein in partners who resist (or worse, refuse) to work within their own best practices.

The key is to provide lateral recruits an opportunity to contribute their knowledge and experience towards the firm's best practices, while understanding that these best practices must then become the standard to which all members will be held.

Drama

While strong personalities can provide for a compelling, engaging interview experience, they can also result in increased drama within the firm if not properly managed. One of the early warning signs is the emergence of

heightened drama, politics, or factions within the team upon the arrival of your latest hire. The temptation may be to see these factions as the development of the lateral hire's new team; but while lateral talent will of course form new social circles, these must not be allowed to emerge at the expense of overall team cohesion.

Mixed reactions upon arrival

One of the more difficult elements to assess with a lateral hire is when you (as the practice group leader or managing partner) are having a great experience, but other partners or associates are not. Certain lateral recruits prove to be very effective at managing up, but can cause difficulties among their peers or direct reports. With such individuals, it is often easy to overlook the negative ripple effects they may have on firm morale, particularly if it is not immediately visible in your personal relationship with them.

This can be compounded if the practice group leader or managing partner is per-

sonally invested in the hire (i.e. they were instrumental in bringing the lawyer over). The key here is to be open to feedback from different levels within your organization on how the latest hire is integrating into the firm, and not rely solely on your individual assessment.

Taken together, all the aforementioned issues may represent a lack of judgment on the part of your latest hire. The real key is to recognize that the hiring process does not end with a signed offer letter. Successful recruitment lies in continuing to monitor new hires beyond their arrival.

Perhaps even more importantly, while firms may deliberate in their evaluation of whether to hire a lawyer, once the warning signs emerge that it may not be working out, it is often better to end the relationship early, rather than persist and run the risk of significantly greater collateral damage to the team.

Warren Smith is a managing director of The Counsel Network. You can follow him on twitter @lawheadhunter.

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