

A photograph of a modern office interior, likely a conference room. It features a long wooden table, several black office chairs, and large windows in the background. A digital display on the wall shows various charts and graphs. The room is well-lit and has a professional atmosphere.

THE LEGAL INTELLIGENCER

# Now More Than Ever, Firms Must Invest in Intentional and Holistic Integration Plans for Lateral Hires

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Your hiring managers have recruited and on-boarded the perfect lateral—the one with all the qualities to help a key practice meet a spike in a demand. Through rounds of interviews, technical machinations, and competing offers, the perfect lateral chose your firm.

That's great news, and a credit to your recruiters and firm. But experience shows us that, when the hard-won new hire logs in that first day at your firm, the challenge is only beginning.

Nearly two years after the first COVID-19 office shutdowns, the lateral hiring market is the hottest in recent memory. In HR terms, that means retention is more important than ever.

In simply human terms, it means it's critical to instill a sense of belonging—to make people feel they are a welcomed, meaningful, contributing member of the organization. It means making sure lateral arrivals are fulfilled at work—long term. The stakes are higher than ever in this intensely competitive lateral market.

At Ballard Spahr, we recognized this well before the pandemic and began work on a roadmap to take us where we knew we needed to get with lateral integration, especially in light of the resources we devote to sourcing and recruiting legal talent. We also recognized that reliance on informal networks—particularly for lateral associates—tends to benefit those demographic groups already well-represented in large law firms. We set out to level the field so that all arriving lawyers reap the full benefits of firm relationships and resources, regardless of background, experience, or perspective.

## **The Pandemic Accelerated the Need**

Then the pandemic turned the world upside down. COVID-19 also accelerated the need for intentional steps when a lateral joins the firm—to make sure that lawyer is making connections, understands and has access to available resources, and feels and functions as a part of the mission. That is especially important for women, lawyers of color, LGBTQIA+ lawyers, and other historically underrepresented groups: The lateral integration program should democratize access to firm leaders and resources. At Ballard Spahr, our formalized—and flexible—plan covers 12



months of activities, touch points, and group gatherings as well as one-on-one conversations with key staff and lawyers. It extends the on-boarding process beyond the orientation information onslaught.

By design, the plan ensures that no newly hired lawyer goes for long before someone checks in—a need that intensified against a hybrid or remote backdrop. COVID-19 disruptions underscored the need for continual check-in with recently arrived lawyers—those who don't have the benefit of a bank of relationships and resources to draw upon like those who started before the pandemic.

### **That Remote Feeling**

In fact, the pandemic created legions of what many refer to as “remote natives”—people who joined their employers just before or post-March 2020. They have had little or no in-person contact with colleagues or other opportunity to draw on their organizations’ “culture bank” or the full energy of interpersonal relationships. Our timing turned out to be prescient, and we were able to formally roll out our 12-month lateral integration program shortly after the onset of the pandemic. Over the past year and a half, it has mitigated the downside of remote working—we all know the upsides—for new hires who are not familiar or connected in-person with the culture, resources, and physical space of the firm.

Even as we move into spring with a renewed focus on more robust office openings and greater in-person interaction, the lessons for remote working will continue to apply as some form of hybrid environment becomes the long-term norm.

### **A Cohesive Approach**

To be sure, many of the activities in our 12-month program were already taking place. The plan expands and memorializes the specific, intentional steps, including order and timing, in a cohesive whole. Notably, the program is informed by surveys of recent lateral arrivals and ongoing formal and informal feedback. It sets a baseline, which participants are free to exceed if they wish. We treat the plan as dynamic, flexible, and tailorable to the individual lateral. We revisit the document on a regular basis and stay cognizant of the need to tread the fine line between too little and too much—to avoid overwhelming people who are already busy.

One crucial component, particularly for experienced lateral associates, involves work assignments. Access to opportunity—the quantity and quality of assigned work—can have a strong impact on the path of a lateral who lacks a large book of business.

### **Addressing Work-Assignment Process Is Key**

Any integration plan should not overlook how work is assigned at the firm. To that end, in addition to a Week 1 assignment-process discussion with the assigning partner, our program includes multiple follow-up meetings with the assigning partner, primary practice group leader, and practice management director. They discuss current workload, practice interests, and introductions that can be made across offices and practice groups. The process is designed to promote equity in assignments and mitigate unconscious bias based on personal characteristics, as well as proximity bias—whereby an associate receives an assignment because they're in the right place at the right time.

Professional mentoring is another crucial plan component, with the intensity tailored to the new hire's experience level, needs, and preferences. While the plan sets the baseline of suggested meetings, the mentor and mentee are free to expand the interactions as much as they choose. Experience indicates that a meaningful mentor relationship can be a strong determinant of a lateral's success at the firm.



Any lateral integration program should also include a performance feedback structure well beyond annual reviews. Our rolling feedback system provides the opportunity for assessment on a regular basis. It even leverages automation to send a notification of the opportunity for feedback from the partner whenever the lateral bills 100 hours on a matter.

At the end of the day, successfully weaving lateral attorneys into the fabric of a firm is all about relationships and relationship building. It's about keeping the lines of communication open.

So go ahead, show your hard-won laterals some love! Chances are good that they'll love you back.

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