

Summer Associates *Outlook*

When Generations Collide

Recruitment, retention and advancement of Generation Y in today's firms

By Virginia G. Essandoh

Increasingly, four generations of lawyers can be found working alongside each other. That reality holds great implications for recruitment, retention and advancement at law firms because generational identities affect expectations and behaviors.

In fact, with the newest generation less likely than any before it to conform and follow in the steps of predecessors, the law firm structure seems in for dramatic change. Wide variations in communication styles, attitudes and approaches will affect working relationships, client relationships and the success of legal organizations.

To prevail in the war for new talent, law firms must recognize that generational identities influence expectations, and expectations affect the success of recruiting, retention and advancement. Those identities also align with certain behaviors, which affect productivity and performance.

So, clearly, a firm's response to the four-generation workforce will play a significant role in its bottom line. Before formulating that response a firm needs to ask:

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Who are the lawyers of today?

The Lawyers of Today

Lawyers practicing today generally range from those admitted to the bar in the 1960s to those admitted in 2010. They are a product of the time periods in which they were raised. The following characterizations are generalizations and, as such, cannot be expected to hold true for every individual in a particular age range.

Traditionalists (1922-1945). These lawyers are 66 or older. When they were associates, law firms had a clear chain of command, and they are comfortable with a seniority-based management style. Change is necessary only when something is wrong. Loyalty, sacrifice and dedication drive their actions. Key characteristics include stability, compliant, fiscally frugal, risk averse and focused on the long-term. Traditionalists want "what is best for the firm."

Baby Boomers (1946-1964). Lawyers in this group are 47 to 65 years old. When entering law firms they were driven by competition; success meant rising to the top. They are career-focused, collaborative and savvy about workplace politics. They have witnessed advances by women and lawyers of color. They value the idea of work-life balance and are positioned to make it work for them. They are motivated by highly visible roles, professional recognition, personal growth, and gratification. Baby boomers want "what is best for everyone."

Generation X (1965-1980). The generation of 31- to 46-year-olds is ascending

toward law firm leadership, so it is critical that organizations determine how to retain, motivate and advance these lawyers. It is a tough assignment. These lawyers value autonomy, are skeptical of authority, loyal to their careers and more likely than other generations to leave for better opportunities. Their entrepreneurial drive is focused on their current and future marketability. They value balance and versatility and are technologically savvy. Gen X wants "what is best for me."

Generation Y (1981-2000). Lawyers in this group are 25 to 30 years old. Younger Gen Ys will be summer associates this year. They are skilled multitaskers, confident, team-oriented and eager to please. Networking for them looks nothing like that of generations past — a fact rife with implications for business development. Their sense of time is similarly unique, given the immediacy of information today. Like many Gen Xers, they attended law schools where women were a majority, and they expect diversity in their firms. And, similar to Boomers, Gen Y wants "what is best for everyone."

Current law firm culture, based largely on traditionalist and baby boomer values and motivations, is familiar. Similarly, Gen X lawyers have been probed and analyzed extensively. As such, this article will mainly focus on getting a better understanding of Gen Y lawyers, starting with their values, expectations and behaviors.

Values

- High sense of equity and fair play.
- Sense of civic responsibility; desire to give back and lead environmentally friendly lives.

- Interest in doing what is best for everyone.
- Expectation of change; support for innovation and creativity.
- Conventional values; desire to please.

Expectations

- Up-to-date technological gear; systems that synchronize with personal gadgets.
- Diversity; a workplace that values differences.
- A firm leadership with high expectations.
- Immediate access to information and services.
- A workplace where individual opinions are sought and valued.

Behaviors

- Aim to please.
- Eagerly accept challenges.
- Oriented toward teamwork.
- Exhibit confidence and optimism.
- May have affinity for boomer lawyers because of nature of relationships with parents.

Getting, Keeping, Growing Generation Y

So what should law firms focus on to recruit, retain and develop Gen Y lawyers?

Include lawyers from all generations on hiring committees. Such committees should also discuss and understand the approach that is needed to attract the best applicant pool.

Websites and recruiting brochures should de-emphasize or even forgo the history and tradition, and focus instead on firm innovation and areas of importance to Gen Y, such as mentoring; training and development opportunities; lifestyle; and work-life balance benefits (e.g., flexible work schedules).

Gen Y is accustomed to involved parents and will likely seek their opinions when deciding on employment. A firm that demonstrates care and concern for the well-being of lawyers — wellness programs, cab vouchers, dinner program for late-night work, pro bono opportunities — may invoke the support of parents.

Be prepared to answer questions from a new generation of lawyers. Interviewing lawyers should be well versed on the firm's training and professional development programs, diversity initiatives, affinity groups, maternity/paternity leave policies, flexible and part-time schedule policies, and the like.

Orientation

Consider revising the orientation process

to provide more guidance in navigating the firm environment and politics. Gen Ys will strive to conform to what they see, but they may struggle in relating to the values, expectations, and behaviors they encounter.

Provide clear guidance as to how others may interpret their work styles, attitudes, interactions with authority, etc. Communicate expectations regarding schedules, office etiquette, and the like.

Gen Ys are most comfortable with informal communication in e-mails, text messages, etc. Explain expectations regarding professionalism, confidentiality and privacy in the age of social media.

Retention

Make clear the many ways in which informal feedback is provided. Ensure that the Gen Ys know that immediate feedback, or lack of feedback, does not mean disapproval or approval.

Encourage partners and senior associates to provide feedback specific to matters/assignments throughout the year.

Enable associates to meet a variety of potential mentors and then allow them to select the one to whom they relate best, rather than randomly assigning mentors.

Support the decision of lawyers who choose more flexibility in their careers.

Gen Ys are said to be loyal to each other and each other's experiences, but they also show loyalty to the institution. Contrast this with Gen Xers, who tend to be more loyal to their immediate supervisors. The "what's in it for me" generation will not martyr themselves for the law firm, and may not respond to a firm message of "just hang on" or "stick with us through the bad times."

More on Feedback

The annual performance review process in most firms meets the comfort level of traditionalists and baby boomers. Gen Ys crave communication, transparency and ongoing feedback about performance and expectations.

Ensure that lawyers receive specific examples of how to improve, the support they will receive in improving and how improvement will be measured.

Look for ways to harness technology to deliver personalized feedback in real time and on demand.

Gen Ys may not be accustomed to negative feedback. Receiving less than the

top grade without explanation could cause motivation and engagement levels to drop quickly.

Gen Ys share performance and evaluation information more freely and openly than other generations. They expect objectivity, fairness and equality in evaluations.

Training and Development

Traditional business development and client relationship building techniques may not work. Revamped training may be required in areas such as client relationships. For example, could social networking be used to connect and build relationships?

Design career paths that provide challenging work and increased visibility for new lawyers. This will indicate a commitment to individual growth and development.

Define competencies that will show growth and development. Many firms have moved to a competency-based model, which will appeal to Gen Ys, as long as they get training related to the competencies.

Gen Y is accustomed to "edutainment." Devise lively, creative forms of training that incorporate technology and the opportunity to collaborate with their peers.

Rewards

Gen Ys will appreciate, in addition to salaries, benefits, and bonuses, nonfinancial rewards such as flexible work schedules, gym memberships and cost-saving/time-saving services.

Acknowledgment, informal or formal, for professional and civic accomplishments is a form of reward.

A collegial work environment, with social activities, community service, affinity groups, wellness programs, pro bono programs, and child and elder care are all rewards.

In conclusion, firms that resist change may find themselves losing out on talent. Law firms need to provide challenging and fulfilling work and, of course, pay competitively. But they also must allow for autonomy (traditionalist and Gen X) and collaboration (boomer and Gen Y); celebrate achievement (boomer and Gen Y), but not too much (traditionalist); ensure feedback, with the proper mix of positives and negatives (Gens X and Y); offer nontangible rewards (Gens X and Y); and communicate often (Gens X and Y).

That is the four-generation challenge. ■