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**DIVERSITY** | IN ACTION

## I Hate This!

Preventing **unhappy** associates and rectifying a **bad** job **choice**.

**BY KATHERINE FRINK-HAMLETT**

**I** am a senior associate at a large law firm with a mid-sized office in New York City. I also am a member of our firm's diversity committee, an extremely active group. We meet regularly, have active partner participation and are intimately engaged in the firm's recruiting activities.

Given our commitment, you can probably appreciate my surprise when I was told that three of the firm's mid-level associates of color (two black and one Latino) left the firm within the last six months. What's even more alarming is that the associates went to other New York City law firms. Although I am not exactly sure the reason for their departures, the rumor mill suggests that they were generally dissatisfied with their experience at the firm but most of the information is non-specific and therefore inconclusive.

We are deeply concerned about this loss and are considering ways to avoid having this situation occur in the future. What can we do to better retain our associates of color?

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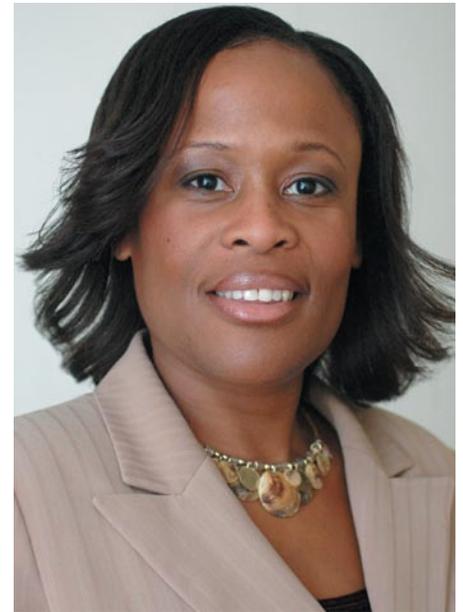
Engage the firm's professional development activities.

Associate retention continues to be a tremendous challenge for area law firms particularly as it pertains to associates of color and, to a large extent, women attorneys. Recent NALP statistics suggest that approximately 40 percent of a firm's associates leave before their fourth year. With associates of color ranks being infinitesimal to begin with, any loss is significant and multiple losses can be severe.

Law firm associates frequently lament that they feel disengaged, undervalued and generally removed from the firm's core. This phenomenon is particularly acute with associates of color, who often complain that their assignments are lackluster or partner feedback is inconsistent or wholly non-existent. When this malady exists over a course of several months it typically leads to detachment and then, ultimately, defection.

"Onboarding" may help minimize this sense of exile, says Emily T. Campbell, Allen & Overy's senior manager, legal recruitment and associate development.

Ms. Campbell explains that onboarding is a term coined from the corporate world and essentially refers



PHOTOGRAPH BY RICK KOPSTEIN

to associate integration to ensure that new recruits and lateral hires are plugged into the firm's functional dynamics. Being plugged in extends well beyond knowing where the photocopier is located, and provides associate access to the firm's brokers, who may not necessarily be the firm's main power players, but rather, key personnel who can point associates in the right direction.

It's all about learning the firm's culture, especially how things get done which, as Ms. Campbell reminds us, can frequently occur on an unspoken, esoteric level. Not being plugged in can be disastrous for any associate, but certainly poses unique circumstances for associates of color because hidden biases may rear their ugly heads so that an unplugged associate is wrongly labeled as incompetent.

Meaningful and ongoing communication is another important component of professional development.

In your situation, it appears that there was a total breakdown in communication. The diversity committee was not even aware of these associates' dissatisfaction and is just now scrambling to figure out the nature of their discontent by piecing together a series of unsubstantiated rumors.

Undoubtedly, some of the firm's remaining associates were aware of the impending defections but somehow this information never filtered to the firm's brokers (including you) who, conceivably, may have been able to rectify the situation.

Ms. Campbell suggests that one way to avoid this information void is by using integration mentors, firm associates assigned to new hires who ask specific questions ranging from logistical matters like the adequacy of supplies and technology support to more intangible situations like secretarial dynamics and satisfaction with assignments. The latter is particularly important since retention and professional development issues typically happen in practice groups.

Firms should be particularly focused on the appropriate development of assignments. So, while document reviews are a necessary rite of passage that leads to the next developmental step, it may be completely inappropriate for an associate to be working on her tenth document review without being assigned to a matter that develops the next set of skills.

An excellent professional development process avoids this scenario altogether but a good process can at least elicit associate feedback so that the brokers can intervene and rectify the situation. Some firms even hire outside consultants to act as career counselors for seasoned associates to assess their development.

The point: Communication is key and must be ongoing.

Ms. Campbell warns that "professional development is not a panacea" but can be among the arsenal of retention tools, particularly as it pertains to associates of color and women. When properly designed, implemented and monitored, professional development becomes a

holistic endeavor that extends beyond the hiring process and embraces recruiting, onboarding, retention, leadership development and succession planning, among other areas.

So, rather than mourn your lost associates, maximize your professional development resources.

**I** am a mid-level, black female associate and I received two offers from two very different firms. The first offer was with a mid-sized boutique very well known for its practice but not a global powerhouse. Everyone I met with was great, and I felt extremely comfortable with the firm's environment.

As much as I enjoyed the people I met (and I think they liked me), I really wanted to be at a firm with an international focus, and so from a practice perspective, the second offer provided the exact type of international work that I wanted. The firm is huge, with several global offices, and I was even hoping that I might be able to eventually transfer to one of the locations outside of the United States.

However, the people were somewhat distant but not necessarily unkind. Notwithstanding, I accepted the offer from the big firm and I absolutely hate it here. I've only been here a few months and I dread the people I work with. I get crappy work and no one seems to know that I'm alive. Even worse, I am not getting as much international exposure as I expected.

What should I do? Do I leave? Help!

First, learn the lesson. How many times do I have to remind associates: It is absolutely imperative to work at a firm where you are valued, where you like the people you work with and they like you.

Of course, practice areas are important and should always be seriously considered whenever you are evaluating lateral options. But under no circumstances should you accept an offer when you are equivocal about your peers (unless the job market is completely wrecked and you have absolutely no prospects whatsoever). This is particularly true if you are gainfully employed and have a perfectly

viable offer from a firm that you are excited about to boot.

Next, it's time for damage control. Go back to the mid-sized firm and try to resuscitate your offer. Presumably, you declined with grace and even wrote a lovely thank you note of appreciation. If not, you'll do so the next time but certainly go back and let them know that after further consideration, you value the firm's practice and environment. Of course, you run the risk of appearing indecisive and non-committal. There also may be some speculation that you're being let go for poor performance so be prepared to offer a recommendation from your current firm if need be.

If the firm provides the offer, great—and plan to stay for awhile. If not, get your search going now and, if possible, try to stay with the current firm for at least a year. However, don't dare pass up a great offer if you don't make the one-year mark.

I hate to tell you I told you so, but I told you so. Good luck! •