Top 10 Unique Challenges Faced by Law Firm HR Departments

**Summary:** The Human Resources department in any law firm faces a number of challenges unique to their situation when compared to other non-legal companies.

Law firms face their own set of challenges that are unique to them. This includes the human resources department. The structure of law firms is unique to other organizations both in and out of the legal industry. Law firms do not comply with a lot of the other standards that other organizations do in regards to work hours, hierarchy, and more. Here are the top 10 issues that law firm HR departments have to tackle:

1. **Technology**

   Technology advances every day. Law firms are often not taking advantage of all the resources available to them, reducing efficiency and effectiveness when compared to other law firms. Advancements in technology make producing documents, conducting research, and filing court documents much simpler. The challenge comes down to determining which members of the staff should have access and training in which programs. Some attorneys want the paralegals, secretaries, and first-year associates to handle all paperwork, so they may be resistant to training.

2. **Confidentiality**

   Law firms are held to a higher standard of confidentiality for the sake of their clients. Issues that affect HR professionals such as medical issues, pay levels, and wage garnishment must be handled sensitively. Discussing cases or clients, no matter how well-known or
interesting they may be, must not happen anywhere outside the office. Including confidentiality policies in the employee handbook and then reviewing the policy annually in staff meetings is important so that everyone is very clear on what is and isn’t allowed.

3. Stress

There is a lot at stake for law firms, creating a very stressful environment. The work is time-sensitive, must be error-free, and involves critical matters. In order to meet these criteria, the staff is often working late to make sure they get the work done. Attorneys are stressing that the staff haven’t gotten paperwork done, while the staff are stressing that the attorneys are hovering over the unfinished paperwork. While not much can be done, since the legal industry usually revolves around the courts timelines, you can stagger work hours so that there are staff working in the morning and some that come in later in the day to help with the last-minute rush of work. It is better to have more employees working part- or full-time than to have all the staff working extra overtime.

- See Top 14 Ways Attorneys Can Avoid Burnout from the Stress of Practicing Law for more information.

4. Recruitment

Top law firms often participate in recruitment events at tier 1 law schools in order to find potential interns and first-year associates. A problem with this method of recruitment is that the applicant pool is often less diverse. Law firms strive to develop more diversity in their staff, but this is difficult when they are not recruiting diversely.

- See Law Firm Diversity: They All Talk the Talk, But It's Harder to Walk the Walk for more information about law firm diversity.

5. Training

Attorneys are required to meet minimal continuing education requirements. Beginning attorneys should also receive professional development training in client contact, marketing, courtroom demeanor, and presentation skills. Legal support staff also need refreshers on their knowledge to ensure they are up-to-date on court filing rules, software, and regulations.

6. Leadership

The reporting structure inside law firms overlaps lines of supervision, creating potential conflicts. Lawyers supervise the work their assistants do, but those assistants report to HR for personnel and administrative matters. Simple requests by legal staff for things like vacation time have the potential for problems. The lawyer might reject their request because of a big project, while HR will approve it because it is paid time off that they have earned. HR managers must walk a fine line to keep all parties happy.

7. Hierarchy

The pseudo-caste system exists within most law firms. The top level consists of shareholders, founding partners, and those that bring in the most money to the firm. They hold the greatest power. Non-equity partners are near the top, but they do not have as much power as equity partners. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the legal secretaries, office support staff, and paralegals. It is not always clear where HR fits into the system, so the amount of respect they will be given can vary from firm to firm.

- See What Law Firm Titles Mean: Of Counsel, Non-Equity Partner, Equity Partner Explained for more information.

8. Performance

Yearly reviews of the performance of associates, especially first-year associates, need to be held. The way reviews are handled for each level of associate will differ. First-year associates will be evaluated on performance ratings regarding things like billable hours. Higher-level associates may be evaluated on matters such as business. Determining a way of evaluating staff on an equal basis can be a challenge. Not every staff member will have the same job roles or expectations from leadership.

9. Retention
The top law firms are competitive places internally and externally. In order to keep the firm’s attorneys and legal staff from leaving, HR needs to find ways of keeping them happy. Part of this includes salary and benefit satisfaction, but it also includes finding other ways to keep the employees happy through its culture.

See the following articles for more information:

- Top Ways for Law Firms to Increase Associate Satisfaction and Increase Associate Retention: What Law Firm Associates Really Want from Their Jobs
- What Causes Associates to Leave Law Firms?

10. Outsourcing

Law firms have been more tempted than ever lately to use contract attorneys and other legal staff. When a big project comes up, instead of hiring new employees, the firm may turn to freelancers to get the job done. This can be a challenge for HR professionals, to ensure these new workers are complying with confidentiality and qualification requirements. Even though they are temporary staff, you still should keep as much information on file about them as you do permanent staff in case of future disputes.

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