Hiring Millennials with Little or No Law Firm Experience: Benefits and Challenges

The Basics of Board Service: Sheila Ronning Demystifies the Fundamentals

Enable Your Organization: Processes, Systems, and "Boundaryless Companies" in the Technological Age

Medical Marijuana – What Every US Employer Should Know

From Nurse to General Counsel: How Mary Rotunno's Passion for Service Led Her to Healthcare Law

Not an ACC member yet? Sign up for a free trial.
Talent Management: A Worthy Addition to Your Value Arsenal

By Jennifer J. Salopek | 2016-Apr-12

Offices of General Counsel at companies nationwide have been focusing new or renewed attention to talent development practices within their legal departments. Many are motivated by such common drivers as difficulty finding qualified candidates and impending retirements. These leaders share a “build versus buy” mindset and have launched bold initiatives to change the way their departments attract, retain, and develop talent. Their organizations are finding that investments in talent management pay off in multiple areas: successful hiring, reduced attrition, deeper bench strength, improved employee morale, and loyalty, among others.

Competency-based hiring at 3M

The matrixed legal organization at Minneapolis-based 3M, a 2015 Value Champion, employs 495 people in 37 countries around the world. The department took a deep dive in 2014 to select a vital few projects and established developing future leaders as a priority. Through competency modeling and development, human capital planning, training and development, and improved recruiting and onboarding processes, the organization has systematically built a robust talent management initiative. These programs already were strong, but as Associate General Counsel Joe Otterstetter observes, “The best time to have a physical is when you’re healthy.”

Hiring was a specific area of focus. 3M had implemented Lawyer Metrics,
a proprietary approach that uses data analysis to drive strategic decisions, during the convergence of its outside counsel selection process. Under Otterstetter’s leadership, the department decided to apply a similar approach to the hiring process. Structured panel interviews are conducted by a small group of department members, each of whom asks questions related to a key competency. While only part of the hiring process, Otterstetter says he finds that the new approach creates greater buy-in for candidates by involving more interviewers, eliminates unconscious bias, and evidences a higher rate of selecting successful candidates.

Smoothing the path forward at Hewlett-Packard

At Hewlett Packard Enterprise, talent management initiatives over the past four years have focused on career and succession planning, and developing an internal talent pipeline. While the legal department (850 people in 50 countries) uses some of the programs and expertise of the company’s human resources team, it created its own process, the Talent Factory, to focus on growing talent organically.

Beginning about four years ago, staff began working to understand and define the entry-, mid- and senior-level roles within the legal department and identifying the necessary skill sets and experience levels for each. Armed with that information, employees could map out their desired path upward through the organization. HPE also increased entry-level hiring, emphasizing hiring for potential as well as for experience and performance, and modified evaluation and compensation structures to align with potential.

One of General Counsel John Schultz’s key metrics for success is the rate of internal promotions. “We were relying on lots of external hiring at all levels of the organization, and our internal promotions were less intentional and planned than we would have liked,” Schultz says. Since the deployment of the Talent Factory approach, he’s seeing results: Of his 13 direct reports, 11 were promoted from within. Of the L3s, the level below that of deputy GC, 78 percent were promoted internally.

“We are seeing the model validated over and over again,” he says. “It has been a great success.”

Rotation and mentoring at The Hartford

The 300-person legal department at The Hartford has focused on operations and structure for the past 18 months, according to Associate
General Counsel Tom Morgan, motivated by the fact that its former siloed structure made it difficult to develop bench strength. "We often relied on one person to do a certain thing, and attorneys often supported the same client for years. Their ability to move across or up was somewhat limited due to that singular focus," he says. Employee surveys revealed that attorneys wanted more opportunities to experience other areas and round out their knowledge base.

Job rotations, mentoring, and peer learning are leveraged in a new program currently being piloted within the business law group. Piloted in early 2016, the program offers interested attorneys the opportunity to work through rotations, in addition to their usual responsibilities, to learn a new area of law. They go in as novices and receive training and mentoring at the side of more experienced attorneys. The year-long duration gives them six months to gain proficiency and six months to perform valuable work, Morgan says: "They don't just bounce in and out."

Developing shared knowledge and team depth at Chubb

At Philadelphia-based Chubb, the world's largest multinational property and casualty insurer, the approach to talent management in the legal department has changed over the past four years. The effort is closely aligned with the department’s goals for knowledge management and leveraging teamwork, innovative approaches which led to being named a 2014 ACC Value Champion. Global Integration Counsel Greg Stern, a member of the Chubb (formerly ACE) Group OGC, observes, "Insurance law is very specialized; it is hard to find people with deep experience in the field. Consolidation in the industry means that there are fewer places to find them. We realized that we needed to 'grow our own' to build the best possible department." Chubb began hiring more candidates straight out of law school and designed training and development initiatives to bring them up to speed.

One key change was creating an onboarding process specific to the OGC. This classroom-based, two- to three-day program is a required overview of Chubb's legal departments and across its entire enterprise. New hires are provided with the basic information necessary to get underway. Later in their employment, they can enroll in the OGC Academy, a year-long program to deepen experience in insurance law and compliance; two classes have graduated thus far. In addition, willing department members can volunteer to be mentors; mentees choose mentors based on areas of expertise. A SharePoint site that also houses robust attorney profiles, including a detailed skills inventory; an online Q&A forum; a digital library; and a catalog of other training and
development opportunities, facilitates the selection process.

The OGC has already seen results. "Morale has really improved over the past few years," Stern says. "We’ve seen a more collaborative spirit and a sense that we’re all in this together. I think people see the talent management processes as an indication that our employees are valued, so they have more confidence and produce better work."

Whether initiatives are aimed at hiring, onboarding, leadership development, or some other phase, all have beneficial impacts upstream for knowledge management endeavors, another key area for increasing value. And they all seem reflective of a new ethos in the legal department about human capital, as so ably expressed by Schultz: "We want to be a talent maker, rather than a talent taker."

Law Department Management

About the Author

Jennifer J. Salopek — a freelance writer based in McLean, Virginia — is a frequent contributor to ACC publications. She can be reached at jjsalopek@cox.net.

Related Items

Succession Management: What is it Good for?

Fixing What’s Broken: Strategies for Increasing Diversity in Law Firms

CLORT Report May 20 2014

The information in any resource collected in this virtual library should not be construed as legal advice or legal opinion on specific facts and should not be considered representative of the views of its authors, its sponsors, and/or ACC. These resources are not intended as a definitive statement on the subject addressed. Rather, they are intended to serve as a tool providing practical advice and references for the busy in-house practitioner and other readers.