

RECALIBRATING  
YOUR EMPLOYEE  
ENGAGEMENT,  
ATTRACTION AND  
RETENTION STRATEGY

THROUGH COVID-19 AND BEYOND

PRESENTED BY

A REFRESHING APPROACH

REALM

TO LEGAL RECRUITMENT





# RECALIBRATING YOUR EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT, ATTRACTION AND RETENTION STRATEGY

## OVERVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a significant impact on businesses of all shapes and sizes. Many law firms are expressing feelings of anxiety, amidst concerns of a repeat of the heavy impact that the 2008 economic downturn had on the legal profession.

Whilst we understand that recruitment is not a priority for most law firms right now, with expansion plans being shelved and contraction in staff numbers likely, it is perhaps more important than ever before for law firms to ensure their best employees are suitably engaged so that they not only do not leave for a competitor, but perform to optimum level.

There is no doubt that the current situation will change things forever in terms of how we work; it is essential therefore for firms to be mindful of the inevitable shift in their employees' expectations.

Using our expertise on employee engagement, attraction and retention, we are working with law firms to help them prepare and respond. We have also launched research into the impact of COVID-19 on these topics, the results of which we will publish in May 2020.

## LIKELY CHANGES TO EMPLOYEES' EXPECTATIONS

In recent years, an increase in salary and greater flexibility have been the most common reasons employees have given us when setting out why they want to move into a new role. The results of a survey of 100 lawyers we conducted in 2019 reinforces this, with money and flexibility coming out comfortably as the two most common priorities survey participants gave when asked what their priorities are when they weigh up a potential job opportunity.

### **Demand for Greater Flexibility**

The legal profession has generally been slow to offer flexibility, whether in the form of flexible working patterns or work from home days. Only 29% of participants in our 2019 survey reported having the option to work non-standard hours.

Whilst setting the majority of their employees up to work remotely was likely to have been no mean feat for many law firms, this demand for greater flexibility that



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existed pre-pandemic will only be exacerbated by the fact that infrastructure to work remotely is now in place.

## **Increased Focus on Support & Wellbeing**

With the challenges to both physical and mental health that working remotely for a prolonged period of time are likely to pose, it is inevitable that employees will be looking for greater support from their employers and for their employers to take more of a proactive approach to wellbeing. More than half of our 2019 survey participants reported to be unaware of their law firm having any form of wellbeing policy or charter, despite [evidence that lawyers are the second most stressed professionals](#).

Some lawyers have been vocal in their criticism of their employers' response to COVID-19. In particular, there has been criticism at what some have perceived to be overly zealous decisions to make redundancies, as well as day-to-day management that has allegedly focused unduly on time recording, chargeable hours and billings, at the expense of, for example, employee welfare. Law firms can expect an increased demand for a more consultative and supportive style of management.

## **Greater Emphasis on Job Security**

As with any economic downturn, job security will become even more important than it ordinarily would be. We are seeing an increase in the number of lawyers identifying themselves as active jobseekers, largely owing to the perceived insecurity of their current job. Employees are going to want to see more transparent evidence that their livelihood is secure.

## **ACTION TO TAKE NOW**

With law firms likely to have now overcome the teething problems associated with mobilising the majority of their workforce to work remotely, there is action that they can now be taking to maintain employee engagement and enhance the likelihood of them retaining their best employees.

## **Review Flexible Working Policies & Infrastructure**

If a firm accepts that they will need to offer their staff a greater degree of flexibility than they offered pre-pandemic, rather than taking a reactionary approach, in responding to the flexible working requests that they will inevitably receive, they



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ought to prepare flexible working policies that allow for greater flexibility before it is requested of them.

The extent to which a law firm embraces greater flexibility for its staff could have an impact on, amongst other things, the amount of physical office space they require going forward, company culture, and staff supervision and management. Plans should be prepared now, and their long-term viability tested, with the relevant company policies re-drafted accordingly.

For example, whilst infrastructure will obviously already be in place to facilitate remote working, it would be sensible to assess whether it is suitable longer-term. The solutions that might have been opted for to enable staff to work remotely as a response to the pandemic might have been selected for the speed at which they could be implemented, rather than because of their suitability to the firm's systems and processes.

## **Implement Wellbeing Initiatives**

Initiatives should be put in place to help ensure the mental and physical wellbeing of a law firm's employees. There are a range of effective and economical options available, including:

- Video personal trainer sessions that focus on postural muscles to combat against the likely increase in the amount of time an employee finds themselves sitting down
- Communication training (e.g. [iMA Strategies](#)) to help remove the risk of misunderstanding and tension that increases when communication doesn't take place face-to-face
- Online social events (e.g. Tea & Toast Mornings / Beer & Wine Fridays / Quizzes / Karaoke) to help facilitate social interaction amongst teams
- Regular one-to-one conversations between managers/supervisors and employees, whether furloughed or otherwise

## **Communicate Thoroughly & Frequently**

Without the physical connection to the firm that going into an office brings, there's a risk of employees becoming disconnected and disengaged, a risk that is only



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exacerbated by their perception of poor leadership and management in a time of crisis. Regular constructive feedback, as well as transparent and thorough updates on team and whole business performance is important to keep employees engaged in both the task at hand and the firm's objectives.

To help alleviate stress and worry over job security, it is also important that management display calmness, confidence and empathy in these uncertain times. Where tough decisions are necessary, transparency is vital. Where reassurance can be offered, it ought to be.

## OPPORTUNITIES

Those law firms that still follow through with expansion plans may well be able to profit from the likelihood of talent being less scarce beyond the pandemic, as a result both of other firms contracting in size and a rise in the number of active jobseekers. There is an opportunity for growth-minded firms to really capitalise if they adjust their employer brand to focus, in particular, on the priorities – flexibility, wellbeing, management and support, job security – that are likely to be most prevalent amongst jobseekers going forward.

### Embrace Flexible Working

As remote working becomes the new normal, what might previously have been considered an attractive level of flexibility may not be so any longer. Law firms wanting to anchor their employer brand on flexibility should consider offering the likes of the following:

- The option for employees to work 2 or more days from home per week on a flexible basis (ie. employees need not commit to the same number of days or same days of the week in any given week)
- A flexi-time system, which enables employees to elect their own patterns of working hours

### Innovate on Wellbeing Initiatives

Law firms wishing to compete for talent on the basis of their wellbeing offering will need to do more than what might be perceived as merely token gestures. Initiatives such as free fruit and healthy snacks and subsidised or paid for gym membership



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or exercise classes, whilst still commendable, will likely become regarded as negligible measures in themselves. Offering the aforementioned, along with a combination of other initiatives, will give credibility to a firm's claim of being one that cares for its staff. Amongst others, there are the following options:

- Putting members of staff through training to become mental health first aiders
- Providing paid for access to counselling services
- Running wellbeing days, consisting of a series of smaller initiatives that focus either on good mental (eg. sessions on mindfulness) or physical (eg. walks in the countryside) health
- Offering better than statutory level sick pay

Firms that care about the wellbeing of their staff will support them not only through the firm's good and bad times, but also on an individual level, through an employee's good and bad times. Those firms that offer genuine support and demonstrate that they care about their staff beyond their capacity to earn will garner loyalty and commitment from their staff. Not only will that act as foundation for an employer brand built around positive wellbeing, but it will support the notion of good management.

Also, having its staff collaborate on and collectively draft a wellbeing charter or policy is a powerful way to give authenticity to a firm's commitment to upholding the wellbeing of its staff.

## **Be Positive & Bold**

Overcoming a jobseeker's anxiety around the last in, first out phenomenon will be difficult in uncertain economic times. Communicating externally a law firm's results and success stories will help to alleviate some of that anxiety.

Retaining a recruiter and actively promoting that fact will also help to do so. The additional upfront expenditure of time and money associated with retaining a recruiter, as opposed to instructing one or many on a contingency basis will truly demonstrate that a firm has properly thought through their decision and is committed to hiring.

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