



Lateral-hire program best practices

Building a successful lateral-hire program

Acquiring novel talent and expertise serves as a mission-critical component of a firm's expansion strategy. Consequently, many law firms are building robust lateral-hiring programs, which entail recruiting experienced talent to fill highly specialized roles as part of a larger strategic plan intended to increase reach into novel market segments, including new geographies, industries, and specializations.

As a result of a steep talent shortage, law-firm lateral hiring has reached a frenzied state, giving lateral hires the upper hand when it comes to both compensation and lifestyle demands. To keep up with competitors – and staff these roles with candidates who will thrive and help build the firm's culture – firms need clearly defined criteria to evaluate fit, skills, and expertise to ensure that the value the lateral hire brings to the table complements the firm's strategic objectives.

Sticking to solid hiring protocols

Success in lateral hiring starts with discipline and intention, particularly when talent is scarce and leadership is anxious. Firms that stick to a defined growth strategy are less likely to get sidetracked by exaggerated books of business and serial lateral hires looking for their next soft landing.

Being specific about the practice areas and specializations you're looking to acquire – and screening out candidates that don't meet those criteria early in the process – keeps you on track with your firm's overarching goals. Consistent hiring standards and requirements protect you from making poor hiring decisions.

For example, some firms require lateral hires to complete a detailed questionnaire documenting their history, experience, and client roster. Although most lateral-hire candidates will agree to fill out the questionnaire, many will submit incomplete forms or leave certain clients off the list. Using this type of exercise, you can quickly identify serious and forthright candidates.

Best practice

Tie your recruiting strategy to your growth initiatives, and weed out candidates who don't fit your needs early in the process.

Best practice

Cast a wide net during background checks, probing public records, social media accounts, and relationships with former employees and business partners.



In addition to assessing expertise, fit, and commitment, you need to evaluate skill sets – especially receptivity to and fluency with important technologies that are instrumental to fostering collaboration and accessing self-service resources. A lateral hire who's ready and willing to enter their contacts into the firm CRM is more likely to succeed in a technology-driven collaborative culture than one that holds their Rolodex close to the vest.

Although it's tempting to tread lightly on due diligence for lateral-hire candidates who check all the boxes, for some firms, the aftermath is unpleasantly familiar: You go through an arduous lateral-hiring process and make an offer to an outstanding candidate, only to learn that your new employee is under criminal investigation. Hiring this candidate has put your firm at risk for allegations of malpractice and reputational damage. Conducting thorough background checks that go beyond the basics protects your firm from this exposure.



Laying the groundwork for effective onboarding

Once a lateral hire passes a thorough background check, many firms initiate risk-management tasks immediately, even while lateral-hires are still transitioning out of their previous firms. Forward-thinking firms take a concierge approach to this process: During the late stages of the hiring cycle, risk teams have already anticipated and handled the compliance requirements – securing waivers, identifying clients, clearing conflicts, and procuring client transfer and management. When lateral hires start, all the red tape has been cleared.

Firms with well-developed lateral-hire programs focus on continuing the onboarding process once the new hire starts. Many firms schedule a welcome meeting with the marketing and business development team, which gives the team the opportunity to explain their services and encourage the lateral hire to both enter their contacts into the CRM and update the department on upcoming marketing and business development needs and opportunities.

Although lateral hires are experienced in practicing law, you should expect a transition period in which they will need support while adjusting to their new environment. Connecting lateral hires with a dedicated resource who can answer questions and foster introductions can help them acclimate quickly and easily.

Best practice

Tackle pre-hire risk management tasks as early as possible to offload administrative tasks and prepare your new hires to jump into active matters on the day they start.

Best practice

Introduce your lateral hires to your business development team, and schedule regular meetings to surface leads and identify opportunities to cross-sell.

Increasing lateral-hire retention rates

Although a warm welcome starts with a solid onboarding program, helping lateral hires feel valued relies on thoughtful gestures that show that they're appreciated and part of the team. After all, everyone likes having their picture and bio on the website and their name on marketing materials when they arrive.

Sending a lateral hire announcement via a firmwide email — highlighting the new team member's expertise, experience, and accomplishments as well as their office location and personal interests — provides openings for colleagues to engage directly, which in turn can spark opportunities to build professional and personal relationships.

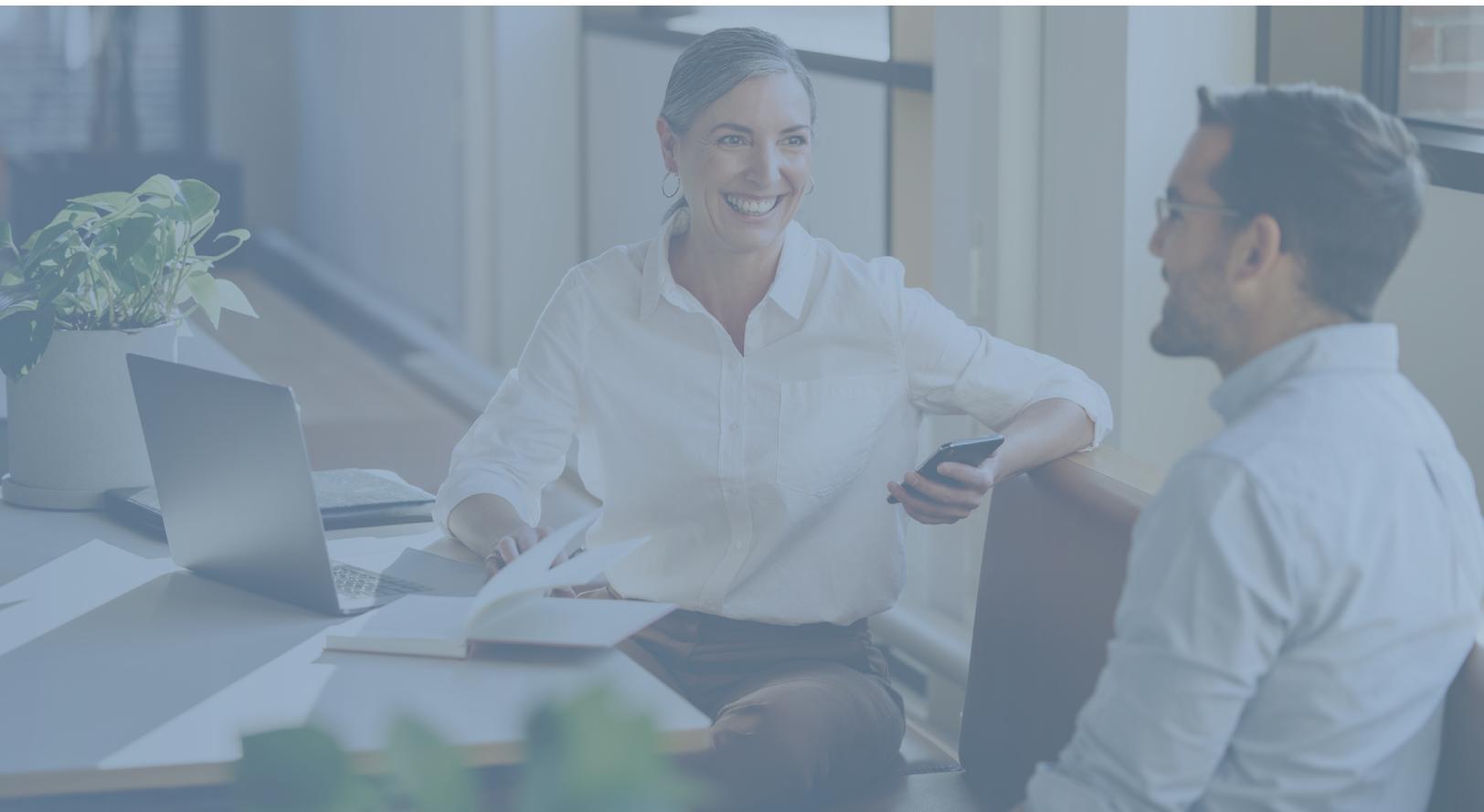
Although some lateral hires acclimate quickly, both professionally and personally, firms should assume it can take a full year for a lateral hire to feel at home. Hosting breakfasts and lunches presents a great opportunity for lateral hires to get to know their colleagues in a professional setting, while sponsoring sports leagues, team-building excursions, group volunteering, and family activities offers new hires the opportunity to socialize over shared experiences and interests.

Best practice

Send a firmwide announcement showcasing your lateral hires' expertise, experience, and personal interests to encourage direct engagement from their new colleagues.

Best practice

Schedule a range of events and activities in a variety of settings to help lateral hires immerse themselves in your firm's culture in ways that feel comfortable to them.



Putting it all together

Meeting your firm's growth goals hinges on the success of your lateral hiring program. Recruiting the right lateral hires bolsters not only the unique expertise, industry knowledge, and geographical coverage your firm needs to maintain competitive advantage, but also the books of business and teams needed to quickly land and expand business and revenue.

With firms across the legal industry scrambling to hire best-in-class lateral hires in a tight talent market, forward-thinking firms are keeping their eyes on the prize by maintaining the rigorous hiring and vetting protocols that put them in a leadership position in the first place – because they know that cutting corners to snap up ill-fitting or otherwise suspect talent leads to bad outcomes.

Innovative firms have formalized onboarding to ensure a smooth transition for lateral hires, and offer ongoing marketing and business development collaboration and support to ensure successful beginnings. To increase retention, these firms stay focused on helping lateral hires feel like they're part of the team from the start, and formalize touch points to engage and check in with them during their critical first year.

Successfully recruiting, vetting, onboarding, and retaining lateral hires to support your growth initiatives in a competitive market requires appropriate technology infrastructure to provide a seamless transfer and sustainable success. Firms that have invested in technologies that connect their people, processes, and data will find themselves winning with their lateral hiring programs.

To learn more, watch the [video](#) and read the [blog](#).

