

KEEP YOUR TOP TALENT BY DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE RETENTION PLAN

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Charles A. Volkert is executive director of [Robert Half Legal](#), a premier legal staffing service specializing in the placement of attorneys, paralegals, legal administrators and other legal professionals with law firms and corporate legal departments. Based in Menlo Park, Calif., Robert Half Legal has offices in major North American and global markets and offers a [full suite of legal staffing and consulting solutions](#).

As business conditions continue to improve, talented law professionals are feeling more confident about their job prospects. While this is good news for attorneys and legal support staff, it presents a challenge for those in law practice management. A recent Robert Half Legal [survey](#) indicated that 31 percent of lawyers surveyed are concerned about losing staff to other employers.

To keep your top legal minds from leaving, you need to ensure your law practice management strategy includes a solid retention plan. Essential to that plan is, of course, offering competitive [salaries](#) and bonuses, but money alone is not enough.

Here are four retention methods you can use to make sure your top performers are satisfied:

1. Keep it interesting by varying the workload. Thirty-three percent of lawyers surveyed by Robert Half Legal said that being offered challenging work and a variety of assignments provides the greatest incentive to remain with their employer. By mixing up the work and offering individuals tasks that challenge their skills and intellect, your legal staff won't feel like their skills are being squandered.

It's also a good practice to check in with your in-house legal team members routinely to ensure they still find their roles fulfilling. Solicit their input on the types of cases they prefer, and do your best to match projects with interests.

Another tool for improving staff engagement is to take on meaningful [pro bono work](#). It will benefit your employees by boosting morale and broadening key skills.

2. Invest in your employees' futures. Thirty percent of law professionals surveyed said that being offered professional development opportunities is an incentive for staying put. By encouraging your ambitious attorneys, paralegals and other support staff to pursue continuing education, they will benefit and so will your firm.

Here are some ways to invest in your workers:

- **Reimbursement:** Help defray the cost of [continuing legal education](#) (CLE) and other work-related pursuits. Your employees will benefit from attending conferences and membership in professional law

organizations. You may have legal support staff who are interested in earning law degrees, or lawyers who wish to pursue an MBA or JD. If your company doesn't already provide work-related training, conference stipends or tuition reimbursement, consider investing in these types of employee benefits.

- **Mentorship:** One cost-effective retention tool is to encourage the sharing of institutional knowledge. Set up a [mentoring](#) program. It will not only help your less-experienced legal professionals by offering practical skills, but your more senior-level attorneys and paralegals will enjoy having a say in shaping the next generation of leaders.
- **Cross training:** Assigning staff to temporary roles in other departments can provide them with insight into the varied operations of the company. It will also expose them to new colleagues and how different teams contribute to the whole. This type of cross training is especially valuable for [future leaders](#) of your company.

3. Foster stress-management skills and maintaining a work-life balance. The legal field is known for being stressful. Twenty-two percent of attorneys Robert Half Legal surveyed said flexible work arrangements would entice them to remain with their employer. Offer your team one or two days a week when they can telecommute, and say "yes" to flextime requests depending on whether it's appropriate for employees' positions. Also encourage your employees to use up their vacation days instead of rolling them over.

When the unavoidable crunch time comes, don't pressure your employees to work consecutive 12-hour days. Doing so can lead to burnout and high turnover. During peak seasons and leading up to big cases, bring in project-based legal professionals. Not only is flexible staffing an ideal way to [manage surging and waning workloads](#), but it's also helpful for spotting and vetting potential full-time legal talent.

4. Provide acknowledgement. Even if your staff members receive above-average wages and bonuses, everyone wants to be thanked for a job well done. Brainstorm ways to show appreciation. Here are a few to get started:

- Publicly acknowledge high performers during weekly staff meetings
- Offer a handwritten note from the CEO or senior partner
- Cover the cost of dinner for team members who stay late to wrap up a project
- Defray the cost of a gym membership

As more companies engage in a tug-of-war over top legal talent, compensation and basic benefits are no longer sufficient to keep competitors from taking your best employees. Institute a first-rate retention program so that even though your star performers know they have a variety of options, they'll choose to stay right where they are.

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