

Business & Careers

Retreats are still vital to a firm's success



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The Headhunter

I was recently speaking with a managing partner for one of the major national firms, where we were reflecting on challenges and lessons learned over the past few years in the market. One interesting observation he made concerned how his firm had cancelled their firm retreat during the economic downturn, and on reflection he felt it was one of the bigger mistakes they'd ever made given the impact on morale and culture.

Obviously this is much easier to see in retrospect, for clearly at the time the firm was deeply concerned with trying to contain costs in a downward trending market. And yet despite the significant cost savings, this managing partner identified it as a mistake in the grander scheme of

trying to build a successful law firm over the long term.

Why do retreats matter? Let's start with the fact that they energize your team. Firm retreats create a rare opportunity to bring the team together, giving people an opportunity to properly appreciate the full potential (and size) of the entire organization. For lawyers, it is easy to lose sight of just how powerful and diverse your firm is when the vast majority of your time is spent in one office, on one floor (and often in one corner) of your firm.

Recognizing you are part of a much larger team of shared common goals can be an energizing experience for all involved: just ask any of the Canadian lawyers at DLA Piper, who recently attended their first international firm retreat, on the power of seeing the size and strength of your firm in person.

Retreats present a rare forum for the firm to tackle more challenging, strategic issues you may be facing at an organizational level. Effective retreats will purposefully create forums to enable the discussion of these issues, ideally with the

intention of creating actionable items to take steps towards addressing these issues.

Whether it is identifying market threats, exploring untapped competitive advantages, or discussing how to better craft the firm's narrative in the market, retreats offer a rare forum to engage on strategic, as opposed to the operational issues which typically form the core of day-to-day discussions at the firm.

Perhaps the most important aspect of retreats is the opportunity to build stronger social capital across teams, groups and the firm generally. While it is clear that the legal profession is comprised of individuals who routinely log long hours and spend many hours together in a work setting, retreats offer a rare opportunity for team members to socialize beyond the immediacy of work-related issues. Building social capital is critical for the long-term success and functioning of the organization — it helps build up the goodwill between lawyers that can be critical to weathering some of the more challenging storms the high-pressure environment a law firm can often create.

Moreover, creating social connections

between lawyers in different offices can be critical in ensuring team members have a positive bias when interpreting the actions (or e-mails) from members who they might not otherwise have the opportunity to socialize with on a regular basis.

In the end, though, it is important to recognize that hosting a retreat in and of itself will not necessarily lead you to reaping the benefits listed above. While many firms organize retreats out of habit, it is critical for the firm leadership to take an active hand in setting an agenda that will permit the organization to consciously move towards achieving the goals as set out above. In doing so, the firm stands the greatest chance of maximizing its return on this considerable investment into the human capital of its organization.

Warren Smith is managing partner of The Counsel Network, one of Canada's oldest and most respected lawyer recruitment and career consulting firms. He is also the first Canadian to be elected president of the National Association of Legal Search Consultants, North America's leading legal recruitment industry association. Follow him on Twitter @lawheadhunter.



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Lafarge Canada Inc. is seeking to add a practical and results driven in-house legal counsel to join its Canadian legal team. The candidate should have strong experience in commercial law. The successful candidate will have minimum of six (6) years of relevant experience gained from a leading law firm. *(Resumes from candidates with less than six (6) years will not be considered.)*

The successful candidate will be based in the Canadian head office in Mississauga and will report to the General Counsel in Canada. In addition to focusing on commercial law matters, you will be expected to work closely with the business operations throughout Canada and collaborate with other legal team members to ensure the company navigates through a variety of complex and challenging legal matters.

Excellent verbal, written and interpersonal skills with entrepreneurial drive are required. French language proficiency would be an asset. The successful candidate will need to be confident, assertive and persuasive as you will be representing the organization in a number of capacities.

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Lafarge Canada Inc. is seeking to add a practical and results driven in-house legal counsel to join its Canadian legal team. The candidate should have strong experience in commercial law and experience in commercial real estate law (lease and purchase & sale agreements). The successful candidate will have a minimum of five (5) years of relevant experience gained from a leading law firm. *(Resumes from candidates with less than five (5) years will not be considered.)*

The successful candidate will be based in the Canadian head office in Mississauga and will report to the General Counsel in Canada. In addition to focusing on commercial and real estate matters, you will be expected to work closely with the business operations throughout Canada and collaborate with other legal team members to ensure the company navigates through a variety of complex and challenging legal matters.

Excellent verbal, written and interpersonal skills with entrepreneurial drive are required. French language proficiency would be an asset. The successful candidate will need to be confident, assertive and persuasive as you will be representing the organization in a number of capacities.

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