

# How In-House Career Counselors Help Facilitate Lifelong Alumni Relationships

By Sharon Light

Alumni programs are becoming the new normal at law firms, but offering dedicated confidential resources to discuss such career-related topics as *becoming* alumni remains more cutting-edge.

Within most law firms, there have always been quiet, closed-door conversations about alternative career paths. Now a growing number of firms are embracing the fact that most lawyers will not remain in the firm for the entirety of their careers and firms are investing in career counseling infrastructure.

In a number of ways, career counseling still seems incompatible with many law firms. No one wants their chances at partnership or access to better work assignments to be squandered just because they expressed curiosity about alternate career paths. For that reason, firms offering counseling know that trust is of paramount importance.

But they also know that it is a business imperative to support these transitions. The NALP Foundation's most recent *Update on Associate Attrition* (available at [www.nalpfoundation.org/bookstore](http://www.nalpfoundation.org/bookstore)) states that an average of 73% of associates will become alumni within five years of joining a firm. Helping lawyers find the best path for them just makes good, practical sense.

Alumni managers and career counselors cite a number of benefits to offering these programs.

- **Recruiting/Culture.** There is stiff competition for top legal talent. Incoming lawyers want to know how you will invest in their careers and future. Create a culture that cares about and invests in its people, beginning with career counseling from day one and culminating in a robust alumni program.
- **Tangible ROI.** Look beyond how many lawyers

land in roles you helped them identify. You can track how many people you've counseled, and how many introductions you've made to alumni and clients. Your lawyers may find their next job on their own, but your support will stay with them for life.

- **Access to job opportunities.** Alumni are more likely to contact you when they are hiring if they know you actively support this. This may facilitate new client relationships or expand existing ones. A structured program also creates opportunities to rehire alumni, which helps firms save on hiring, recruiting, and training costs.
- **Support attorney retention.** By offering counseling, you will know when your best talent is looking to leave, providing an opportunity to address concerns and retain these lawyers for a longer period of time.
- **Create loyal alumni.** Counseling may help your lawyers land a better position than they would find on their own, or guide them to a role with an existing client. Think about the last time you searched for a new job. Any help navigating that process will create deep loyalties.

If you are considering adding or building out this function, those in the know have some suggestions:

1. **Framing is important.** "Career development" is preferable to "career placement" or "outplacement." Some counseling will be for lawyers who *do* want to make partner. Making your program open to the widest variety of career options will make it easier for people to understand.
2. **Trust and confidentiality are paramount.** Whoever is involved in counseling must be seen as in-

dependent. Don't seat your career counselor in a glass-walled office or next to the elevator. Even in an accepting environment, these conversations deserve the utmost discretion.

3. **Counseling goes hand in hand with a robust alumni program.** One career counselor told me, "One of the strongest things I can do is introduce firm lawyers to alumni." Knowing where your alumni are and who among them is open to mentoring or networking adds unique value. And alumni know they can tap into a network of accomplished attorneys when they are looking to hire.
4. **Promote the benefit early and often, and systematize your counseling.** Normalize counseling by offering it to every associate, and follow up regularly. When check-ins with the counselor begin as soon as an associate joins the firm, the counseling becomes an ongoing conversation rather than solely a discussion about leaving the firm. Without an in-house counselor, an attorney might be more inclined to take a call from a recruiter when they have a bad day. A counselor can help put things in perspective and work through bumps in the road.

One counselor remembers receiving this advice: "When people look back at their time with an employer, they are likely to remember the highlights of their experience, and how they felt when they were leaving." Career counseling has a major role to play in both of these areas, leading to happier alumni. Happier alumni will build your firm's brand, refer more work to your firm, and reach out to you when they need to hire a new colleague — bringing their lifelong experience with your firm full circle.■

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# A Perfect Pair: How Alumni Relations and Professional Development Can Partner to Enhance Careers and Increase Revenue

By Amanda Stipe and Alexandra Williamson

With smart planning and collaborative communication, a law firm's relationship with its lawyers can span the entire lifecycle of their legal careers. A firm's Professional Development and Alumni Relations professionals are key figures in this career lifecycle, and a solid partnership between the two can enhance lawyers' career opportunities and ultimately drive revenue growth for the firm. From law students and summer associates exploring career paths, to firm lawyers who need training and access to future opportunities, to firm alumni who have left but want to enhance their professional network, integrating these populations creates a community that benefits its members and the firm.

## Recruiting

Law students are hungry for information about the firms they hope to join and are eager to understand the opportunities a career with a firm can provide. In this era where user-generated reviews play a major role in influencing decisions (e.g., Yelp), lawyers who left the firm but return to share their experiences with hopeful associates can serve as a five-star review. Alumni Relations and Professional Development can collaborate to host a thoughtful on-campus discussion featuring firm lawyers' perspectives on diversity and firm culture as well as views from alumni on client service and their careers after leaving the firm.

This partnership can continue adding value for law students and alumni alike during the firm's summer program. Whether inviting alumni to a summer event, staffing a summer associate on a matter led by an alum-

ni-client, or placing a summer associate in the legal department of an alumni-client for a portion of the summer, giving candidates access to successful alumni role models gives them a sense of the diverse opportunities available to firm lawyers. In turn, alumni welcome the opportunity to reconnect with their alma mater and share their experiences with future lawyers.

## Training and Continuing Education

The legal and skills training law firms provide for their lawyers is a key component of a successful legal career. When Professional Development creates skills-based training around client service and professional growth, it might consider partnering with Alumni Relations to identify and invite alumni back to speak on the topic. Alumni often have outside perspectives to share that firm lawyers haven't yet experienced, and this insight is a valuable view into a client's world or life after the law firm. Some jurisdictions award MCLE credit for these skills-based programs with extra credit for the alumni presenters.

When used strategically, MCLE programming also provides an opportunity to showcase a lawyer nearing promotion or a junior partner who wants to build his or her external brand. Alumni Relations can identify in-house alumni who would welcome an MCLE presentation, since in-house legal departments often have limited access to these substantive legal presentations. Collaboration that highlights the expertise of the firm and its lawyers to targeted in-house legal departments often leads to business opportunities and will drive revenue growth.

## Career Planning and Growth

Professional Development is often involved in associate career planning, whether in an official capacity as a career coach or in day-to-day interactions with the associates they support. Collaborating with Alumni Relations can maximize opportunities for associates seeking career advancement outside of the firm since they generally maintain the firm's alumni job board and know of opportunities that associates can explore. Frequent communication can match alumni who want to add quality lawyers to their legal teams with job-seeking associates, increasing the likelihood that satisfied associates will refer new business opportunities back to the firm.

Career growth for both firm lawyers and alumni is not only about promotion, but also about having a strong professional network that contributes meaningful opportunities to one's success. Alumni are often accomplished firm allies who are proud of their time spent in the trenches, and firm lawyers in turn are proud of their colleagues who leave to pursue rewarding careers. Alumni Relations develops reunions and other targeted programming for alumni and firm lawyers to connect and deepen existing relationships, leading to increased mentoring and new business opportunities. Maintaining strong and positive relationships with alumni also creates an ideal platform for rehiring opportunities at the firm.

From on-campus engagement to well beyond the retirement party, a solid Professional Development and Alumni Relations partnership adds value for law students, firm lawyers, alumni, and the law firm. Capitalizing on the strengths of these professionals positively impacts recruiting, training and continuing education, and career planning and development — and ultimately drives revenue growth. Working together to support lawyers at every stage of their career lifecycle, Alumni Relations and Professional Development are the perfect pair. ■

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