

Help Wanted: Seeking Really Smart Lawyers Who Are Really Good People

► **Akin Gump hiring partner David Botter discusses the firm's quest for exceptional talent. Spoiler alert: One size does *not* fit all.**

CCBJ: Tell us about Akin Gump's culture and the spirit of your hiring process.

David Botter: We've always had a sincere interest in the development of our lawyers, both as human beings and as lawyers, and we try to help them meet their goals and find the right path, which is not one-size-fits-all. We've always focused on hiring exceptional talent and we look for people who are hardworking, smart and who embody the firm's core values: collegiality, commitment, excellence, integrity and intensity. Our lawyers are often described as top-flight practitioners who are genuine, down-to-earth and approachable. I like to say that we hire really smart, really good people.

We have a strong focus on diversity. Our clients operate in many different industries and across the global marketplace. Both our firm and our clients are best served by a diverse and inclusive legal workforce. Hiring individuals with varied backgrounds, viewpoints and experiences adds to our ability to provide top-flight work product and an environment that people feel comfortable working in.

Explain your role as the firm's hiring partner.

My primary role is upholding the firm's values and standards for recruiting. This ensures we maintain our culture while looking for the best and brightest legal

talent. One of the things that drew me to Akin Gump was the ability to practice law in a respectful environment where people were decent to each other.

I got involved in recruiting as a senior associate. Then, in becoming first a New York hiring partner and then the firmwide hiring partner, part of my responsibility was to make sure we would continue to surround ourselves with people who saw the practice the same way we did – a practice at the absolute top of our profession that provides clients with the best work product and the smartest thought process, but does it in an inclusive work environment.

I sign off on all lateral hires at Akin Gump. Generally, I see really talented individuals from a résumé perspective – they have great credentials and have operated at the best schools or in the best law firms, or in the best legal environments. But my focus is always on the human aspects, so I look at every single evaluation of every single lateral candidate to make sure that we're not making hiring mistakes from a cultural perspective.

In addition to that, I invest a good deal of time on on-campus recruiting. Every summer we have five programs hosted in our U.S. offices: New York, D.C., Los Angeles, Houston and Dallas. I visit with each of our summer associates in those offices to develop relationships with the future of our law firm, the



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next generation. I want to get a sense from the summer associates of what we're doing well and, frankly, what we can do better.

The firm recently hired Carrie Marker as director of career counseling and planning. Is this a new role within Akin Gump and, if so, what is the firm hoping she will add to the environment?

It is a completely new role within the firm and we are incredibly excited about it. We've provided career

planning and counseling services to all of our lawyers for many years now, but it's mostly been through outside consulting services. We were looking to strengthen our talent retention efforts and to identify opportunities that add value to our lawyers. We felt we were doing a good amount of that already, but in order to really understand our lawyers' needs we determined that having an internal resource would be better. So we went out in the marketplace to look for a person who would fit our culture and our needs, and Carrie was the perfect person. Her focus will be on career counseling, integration planning and behavioral coaching.

Integration planning, or how we successfully integrate our lawyers into the firm, is critical. With career counseling, Carrie will help people develop short-, medium- and long-term business plans. If someone is, for example, a first-year associate, they may not understand how to take ownership of their career and how they should view their future. Or if someone is coming back from parental leave, they may not know how to balance returning to work with the different responsibilities they have at home. Carrie will help them understand what they need to do, and will be a resource to check in with as they continue to develop as lawyers.

Let's talk a little bit about Akin's Be Well program.

It's a fantastic program spearheaded by our chief human resources officer. We developed it in 2016, and it was rolled out to all of our offices in 2017. With the Be Well program, the firm provides a resource for employees that supports our long-term commitment to individual well-being. It spans the spectrum from physical well-being to mental and behavioral health, financial security and social responsibilities.

As participants complete Be Well activities, they earn points that accumulate towards various levels of achievement. As they accumulate points, the firm will reward those participants through a wellness bonus paid at the end of each calendar year. We want our employees to be physically, mentally and socially well.

We have an active, full-time manager who runs this program, and we have dedicated resources to it, with more than 20 wellness champions from offices around the globe. We see new opportunities for the Be Well program each year, and I think one of the most

important things we've done most recently is pilot an on-site behavioral health counselor in our D.C. office this past year. We are planning to roll that out in many other offices as the year goes on.

Mental health is a very important and critical issue in the legal profession, and we're looking to give our employees those services and others through our Be Well program. It is really a terrific opportunity for people to do right by themselves and for the firm to reward them for doing so.

Is the firm doing anything interesting or innovative on the recruitment or retention front?

We developed our own blog last year called Legal Scoop (legalscoop.com), which is an information portal mainly focused on on-campus recruiting, but also is relevant lateral recruitment. It offers practical tips and advice on a wide range of topics, like finding the right law firm fit; starting off on the right foot; advice for the fall semester from a junior associate; and top questions for litigators, transactional or regulatory lawyers. As people are going through the on-campus interviewing (OCI) process, the blog helps them figure out what they need to know and

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what should be important. It is our effort to provide a resource for people who may not have one available.

We talk to our young associates and our lateral associates to find out what we can do to retain our employees and recruit top talent. Every year, we hold three different academies: a fall associate academy, a midlevel associate academy and one for new counsel.

We also piloted an application called Anytime Feedback for those who are looking for feedback on a more frequent basis than annual evaluation. Any associate can go into the system at the conclusion of a project and solicit feedback from senior lawyers on that particular project, whether it's writing a brief, a deal closing, whatever it may be. The system sends out an email saying that the associate or counsel has requested

feedback from a particular senior lawyer and then tracks whether or not feedback was given and sends reminders.

We have a very large alumni program, which provides opportunities to connect with professionals in different fields. The connection with our alumni is incredibly strong. We just celebrated the 25th anniversary of our New York office opening and had over 100 alumni attend.

Akin has several ways for associates to give feedback to senior management, including direct feedback to Kim Koopersmith. How does the firm go about collecting, evaluating and acting on feedback from associates and counsel?

Kim is an incredibly active and engaged chairperson. She has her finger on the pulse of everything that goes on in the firm and is looking for feedback all the time. We have a firmwide Associates' Committee that meets twice per year and is currently co-chaired by Kim and a counsel in our D.C. office. Each office in the law firm has an associate or counsel representative who sits on the firmwide committee, and that's one way in which we are able to funnel communications from our associates and counsel to Kim.

At our most recent midlevel academy for our fourth year associates, we had what's called a hackathon. We put together teams and had each team pitch one idea for how the firm can best support its associates. We listened to the pitches and selected a couple fantastic ideas, and immediately put teams together to work on implementing them.

Kim and I have always been focused on making our attorneys' experiences better. Every summer when I visit the summer associates throughout the firm, I schedule a meeting with the Associates' Committee in each of the offices to garner feedback, which I will then take back to team management to try to implement. We can't do everything, but we try to do as much as we possibly can.

We are very focused on our recruiting and the retention of our lawyers. We want to bring in the best people – those who are top-flight lawyers and who are decent, respectable human beings. We want to keep them, and we'll work really hard to do that. ■