

Podcast: How Law Firms Combat the Great Resignation (Part 1)

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The Coronavirus's impact on workplaces has led to what many are calling "The Great Resignation." It's almost impossible to replace employees who are leaving their jobs, and it's impacting every industry nationwide.

In this two-part episode of [More with McGlinchey](#), Labor and Employment Chair and New Orleans Office Managing Member **Mag Bickford** is joined by Director of Human Resources and Chief Diversity Officer **Eliska Plunkett**, Chief Business Development Officer **Heather Morse**, and Director of Talent Acquisition **Margeaux Roush** to discuss what risks law firms face when it comes to attrition, and how firms can proactively guard against losing their best and most talented people.

Mag Bickford: I'm **Mag Bickford**. Today, I am gathering with some of the senior team here at McGlinchey to talk a little bit about these issues. With me today is **Eliska Plunkett**. She is our Human Resources Director, as well as our Chief Diversity Officer. She also has many years of practice as a management labor and employment lawyer. So we look to her for lots of different types of guidance. **Margeaux Roush**, also on our call today, is the Director of Talent Acquisition, and it's her job to identify potential talent and bring them into the fold. And we appreciate everything that she does in that regard. **Heather Morse**, also on the call, is our Chief Marketing Officer. Heather is here to help us find the best strategies for implementing many of the things that Eliska and Margeaux are going to talk about today.

So what we're going to talk about primarily is the issue itself, what the best practices are to identifying and retaining talent, and to overcome the problems presented by the great resignation. We are not immune from the impacts of the Great Resignation in the law firm world, but we're trying to get ahead of the issue in responding to the changes in the marketplace. So Eliska, as head of human resources, I wanted to ask you: what changes have we seen, both in legal and here at McGlinchey, over the past two years?

Eliska Plunkett: The number one thing is what employees are looking for in their job has changed. They're not looking for a nine-to-five to pay the bills. Employees are now looking for meaning in the work they do. They want to be seen for their contributions. And more than any other time, they want flexibility, both in work/life balance, and when and where they perform their duties.

Mag Bickford: What sort of things is McGlinchey doing to meet those objectives?

Eliska Plunkett: I think the first thing we're doing is embracing change. We've learned over the past two years, that change is inevitable, but it's not enough just to adapt or adjust to the change. We found we have to drive the change. One of the things we did very early on in the pandemic was to pivot toward remote work, but we didn't look at it just as a temporary solution to a problem. We looked at it from a perspective of, how does this change how we'll practice law going forward? So we adopted a policy. We are about a year, a little over a year, into full-time remote work positions. And we're continuing to flex and pivot. We're learning that some positions really do work very, very well remotely. We're also listening to our employees who are in the office day in and day out because their experience has changed. And we want to understand the impact and the consequences they're experiencing as a result of a number of their coworkers not being in the office on a day-to-day basis.

Mag Bickford: We've changed our strategic focus with regard to employee wellness, engagement, and connection. What specific tools have you done to make those connections all work efficiently?

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Eliska Plunkett: Taking new approaches, focusing on the employee outside of work, not just the employee at the office. One thing we've talked about for the last year is, we need our employees to bring their A-game to work. We need them "all-in" while they're helping solve our clients' problems, but we have to take care of their needs. If an employee is focused on taking of an elderly parent or doesn't have childcare, which was a huge problem during the pandemic, we want to do what we can to support them so that when they're "on," they're "on" without having to worry about other issues in the background. We've been very attentive to mental health, having initiatives like "Wellness Wednesdays," or putting out so much information and resources for employees who may be struggling with stress and anxiety, addictive behaviors, anything that they are struggling with. So looking at the employee as a whole person. We're finding resources that can support our employees, both at the office and outside the office. We've had an Employee Assistance Program for quite some time, and that has been very useful. But we're looking beyond that now, looking for additional resources that may be helpful for an employee struggling with addiction, for example.

Mag Bickford: So some other tools that go toward our culture and retention that I've appreciated over the past couple of years has been our Ministry of Fun and our SOS team. Can you talk a little bit about those initiatives?

Eliska Plunkett: Oh, absolutely. So as we all are working more remotely, even those working a hybrid schedule, we don't have that day-to-day contact with each other to the extent we had before the pandemic. So we've been looking for ways to interact with each other in a way that we still feel connected. So it really started with our "Be Well, Stay Well" program, where we were all remote. And we were putting out a newsletter a day with substantive information about policies or procedures, as well as just fun things to make us feel connected and silly. So our "Be Well, Stay Well" program really morphed into our Wellness Works program, and the Ministry of Fun is a huge component of that. They come up with trivia events, and step challenges for physical well-being, and a book club, and trying to make all employees feel included and connected to each other.

Now looking at our SOS team, one thing we learned from remote work is, we don't all have to be in the same office to support each other. So another aspect of retention and really recruiting is the ability for people to support each other remotely. SOS team came out of that: instead of having support staff directly in the office that you turn to, we now look at our resources on a firmwide basis. And we created a mechanism to put a ticket out there as it were. And a secretary in Irvine, California can pick up a project from an attorney in New York City. And it works seamlessly, which is not something we'd ever considered doing — kind of a silver lining, as it were, of the pandemic.

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Mag Bickford: One thing that I like to comment about is that all these efforts have been very successful. Here in the New Orleans office where I'm Managing Member, it was very exciting this year because our employees nominated us for one of the “Best Places to Work” in New Orleans. And we in fact were one of those which won that award. But we're really proud of that, because that tells us that our employees are engaged, they're happy, and they know that they're welcomed here and appreciated. They're bringing their A-game just like we wanted them to!

Now, Margeaux, I'd like to talk with you about some of the efforts going on here at McGlinchey Stafford. You lead the firm's recruiting efforts. We know that employee retention begins by hiring the right people and getting them integrated to be their most productive. We want them to drink the Kool-Aid. What can firms do to remain competitive in attracting and retaining employees? What have you seen? And what's working for us?

Margeaux Roush: Well, primarily, we are incredibly fortunate to work at a firm that truly values its employees. The firm has made a commitment in 2022 to financially invest in recruiting and retention and onboarding and to take a look at our current policies and procedures and how we can improve those things. We're kind of referring to that over the past two years as our “silver linings playbook.” What did we learn from the past two years? We've done exit interviews. We're working on engagement surveys. We have regularly been surveying our employees to get their feelings through anonymous surveys. How are you doing? How are you engaging with the new benefits? Are you aware that these new benefits, or these enhanced benefits, are out there, so that our employees are fully engaged and aware of what resources they have at their disposal? And as Eliska mentioned, one of the things that we think is really important is that we're focusing on more than just being an employer. We're focusing on the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of our employees. From the first day you enter as a paralegal or a law clerk all the way up to our rainmakers, every single one of those people is being treated the same when it comes to physical, emotional, and mental well-being. That's a priority for us. So that is one thing that we've really focused on through those surveys and exit interviews or engagement interviews.

We've additionally done, and some changes in benefits, which Eliska highlighted. That started before the pandemic but we've continued to invest in wellness as a way to really ensure that our employees feel like their needs are being met. So we've enhanced our fertility benefits. We have enhanced parental leave. We have enhanced transgender benefits. We are working on changing our 401k plans. We want to make sure that an employee joins McGlinchey and has as many opportunities to grow and feel supported as possible.

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Mag Bickford: One thing that I'm really excited about is our new benefit that involves the payment of student loan debt. Maybe you could tell us a little bit about that.

Margeaux Roush: One of our associates actually brought to our attention that in the CARES Act, there was an opportunity for employers to assist with facilitating payback to student loans, to eligible student loans. And the firm has very recently implemented, with a partner, a way that you can log into a website, highlight "this is the student loan that I'm still paying for." And the firm and this vendor that we're working with have partnered together, so you literally click a button and automatically there is payment to the principle of that student loan that is assisted by the firm. So we really are investing in some of those things that are hard for our employees. When you're a lawyer and you graduate with a ton of legal student debt, it's nice to know that the firm recognizes that that is a challenge for you. Not only is that available to our attorneys, that's available to all of our professional employees here at the firm. So anyone in administration, anyone in legal support, if you have a qualified student loan from education that you obtained, you are eligible to participate in that student loan repayment program here at the firm.

Mag Bickford: When I meet with candidates, they also have a lot of questions about our culture. And of course I'm a little biased, but I think we have the best culture of any law firm which I've been affiliated with. And, you know, part of that culture is the fact that we've closed the gap between attorneys and our professional staff. And we've also developed a very entrepreneurial approach to the practice of law. And engagement is encouraged from the day you walk in the door. What are your comments on some of those items?

Margeaux Roush: First of all, as a firm, we're evaluating a potential employee not just based on their resume. We're looking at every single thing on your resume. What strengths can you bring to the firm? If we meet you and you're a great candidate, but we don't necessarily have an opening for you immediately, we will talk to you about potential opportunities in the future. We will file your resume away, and when an appropriate opportunity comes up, you are our first call. We do try and be flexible and dynamic with our hiring processes. I have hired several attorneys that I met at the wrong time. So I met them and I didn't have an opening and six months later, I had an appropriate opening. Before I even post the job, we go through that inventory list, see who is available and who is appropriate, and if they've got the qualifications, their resume goes to the top of the pile and they're my first call. Additionally, all of our talent acquisition team and all of our interviewers are really well versed on the culture at McGlinchey. Like you mentioned the fact that we do like to come to work and engage with each other. We encourage our employees to get to know each other on a personal level.

We have outside-of-work interactions. We have lunches together, happy hours together, outings together, go do volunteer work together so that we can get to know each other. And then when the stresses of work come up, you know each other, you know better how to respond to that individual person. And some of the first people that you will meet at the firm, whether it's a member of my team or me or a member of our Strategic Growth Committee, they're excited about working here. They come to work every day because they like working here. We have had a significant transition in the last five years as a firm. We've pivoted to a much more family

and integrated culture, being a nationwide firm, instead of a bunch of offices strung together by the same name. And you really do see that across the firm. You see people engaging with each other in different offices, like the SOS team. We operate across three very different time zones in very different offices, with very different cultures. Every office has their own culture or aspect or things they get excited about or sports teams or whatever it is, their activities, but we make sure that that is covered across the board. So if someone in Irvine is working on something for New York, sometimes that time zone makes the difference. That's what the SOS team is there for.

To see young associates come in and start their careers and decide they want to grow their careers here at McGlinchey is what lets you know that what we're doing is working. That we're creating a platform that is welcoming and inviting.

Heather Morse: So, let me jump in really quick on that one. It's really important to recognize that these things, culture change does not happen in a vacuum. These are very intentional objectives of firm leadership that we were able to execute on. So taking really great firm leadership that we have had for a really long time, but we've also seen a transition in our leadership. We've been doing the work behind the scenes, making sure that our policies, procedures, our governing documents are structured in a way that it allows a culture shift to take place.

And by doing this and being very deliberate in what we're doing, the thing that's exciting me the most is really the young associates who are joining the firm. For those of us who've worked in law firms for a really long time, we haven't seen a huge engagement with young associates. And so to see them come in and to start their careers and decide they want to grow their careers here at McGlinchey is what lets you know that this is working. You know, that what we're doing is working. That we're creating a platform that is welcoming and inviting. It's making sure that we're utilizing the right language across the firm because language does matter. So we went through all of our online documentation through our policies and procedures that are behind the scenes to make sure we were taking away language that wasn't equitable, making sure that it's inclusive. You know, everyone jokes, I take the word "staff" out wherever I can, because we are all contributors to the ecosystem of this firm. We are professionals. We are legal industry professionals, whether you are the person who is sitting and welcoming people at our reception desk, to the people who are behind the scenes making sure that the work of the business of law takes place, to the people that are really supporting the lawyers do the work that they need to do for their client. We are all part of that ecosystem supporting the number one thing, which is our clients. So "happy lawyers, happy clients" is what I like to say. And lawyers are happy when the people who are supporting them are happy. So working together with such a great team has been so exciting for me because we're able to envision and then execute. And now we are seeing results.

Mag Bickford: Thanks, Heather. This is the end of our first episode discussing the great resignation. We'll pick up here in our second installment where we'll talk about culture, staying flexible, inclusion, and other strategies to keep your most valued employees.

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