

Human Resource Executive®

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O'Melveny & Myers colleagues gear up for a stair-climb challenge benefiting the Los Angeles YMCA.

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of respect in which everyone's opinion matters, partners routinely demonstrate confidence in employees' abilities and prime opportunities are shared, not hoarded.

"I find it quite fantastic," she says. "I feel very lucky to be here."

Apparently, so do others, especially considering the firm's turnover rate is lower than the industry's average of 21 percent. O'Melveny has been rated as the best law firm to work for, according to the *2019 Quality of Life* rankings by Vault.com. The firm grabbed the top spot in nine different categories: associate/partner relations; firm culture; hours; informal training, mentoring and sponsorship; quality of work; satisfaction; transparency; diversity for individuals with disabilities; and summer associate program.

Considering that the legal industry mostly supports people with Type-A personalities who are highly competitive and generally work in high-pressure environments, how does the firm consistently pull this off?

"We have a distinctly positive culture," says Michelle Egan, managing director for talent development at O'Melveny in San Francisco. "We're about people and back it up with our programs."

Invest in People

Take O'Melveny's eight-year-old career-success program, which adopts a long view of talent. James Moore, the firm's director of career development, has met with more than 900 lawyers since the program began to discuss their career interests and help them stay at the firm, move on to another job or create a career path that prepares them to work for one of its clients.

"We want them to be successful wherever they go," Egan says, adding that some, such as Chanoine, return to the firm years later. "If they decide to come here and don't want to be a partner, [we explain], 'This is what your career path will look like.' So when they leave us, they feel like they have learned everything they can about the firm."

And there's plenty to learn. Its coaching program helps those on maternity or paternity leave re-enter the workforce and assists emerging leaders with sharpening their communication or leadership skills. More than five years ago, Egan says, the firm hired Jesse Katz, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, to conduct one-on-one coaching sessions with associates to improve their business and brief-writing skills. The move was so successful that the firm hired two more editors this year as writing coaches.

A Firm Commitment to Culture

The legal field is notorious for challenging employee conditions, but O'Melveny & Myers defies the odds with an investment in its people.

BY CAROL PATTON

Maybe it was the three rounds of meaningful interviews or the way the partners interacted with her when she was a summer associate back in 2003, or perhaps it was the presentation made by then-U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher that impressed her.

There were a number of factors that prompted Hannah Chanoine to return to O'Melveny & Myers law firm in New York as counsel in 2015. Before then, she clerked for a judge—Sonia Sotomayor, now a U.S. Supreme Court justice—and worked as an attorney at the U.S. Department of Justice and the Mayer Brown law firm.

"I was really impressed by the [O'Melveny] interview process, which was very thoughtful about how it was put together," she says, explaining that, in the process, she met people who would be her colleagues, others from her practice group and those who could boost her career. "What also stuck in my mind from my original experience at O'Melveny were presentations given by partners to associates. They explained some of the more confusing aspects of what clients were doing to help very young lawyers get a sense of the bigger picture."

After three years at the firm, Chanoine says, her impression of the organization outshines others. She says the global, full-service firm, which employs nearly 1,000 people, encourages a workplace culture

This past spring, Egan adds, the firm invited 100 of its minority and women associates to its first diversity and inclusion academy, which featured speakers and interactive sessions focusing on what they can do to stand out, gain confidence and improve communication. Likewise, its six-year-old Bridges program enables people to take up to two years of unpaid leave to pursue other interests, such as raising a family.

Ask, Listen and Act

The firm's most comprehensive program is Upward Review, which is conducted every other year. The initiative was introduced in 2001, and Egan began enhancing the program in 2012. Now, associates (those with six or fewer years of legal experience) and counsel (those with more than six years of legal experience who are not yet partners) voluntarily answer pointed questions—face-to-face—for 45 minutes about the effectiveness of their supervisor and offer opinions about the firm across multiple categories, says Naomi Beard, CEO of Naomi Beard & Associates, a global consulting firm in Lincoln, Neb. Beard has conducted the reviews, which take six months to complete, since 2011.

Last year, 458 of the law firm's associates and counsel worldwide (or 93 percent) participated.

"It's meant to take them through the life of any given assignment and then rate how a partner or counsel performs as a mentor or supervisor," says Beard. Her team synthesized the 2017 data into 225 written reports on how individual supervisors, counsel and partners are performing, as well as thematic reports based on the interviews. "We pull all of that together in an executive summary, share what we heard and then highlight emerging themes."

Each report also features a section called "Analysis and Coaching Points," which offers suggestions on how partners and counsel can better engage with associates and cultivate stronger relationships. Beard and her partners, who are former attorneys, also prepare and share office, department and practice-group reports with the

associates, counsel and partners.

Some HR professionals may like the sound of upward reviews, but they must also be prepared. Beard says it's important for leaders to be clear about their long-term goals, the type of feedback wanted and the type of culture they're trying to build. Next, determine a process for gathering feedback that fits with your workplace culture and then develop a clear sequence on how this will unfold. Introduce the process very clearly so everyone understands how and why it's being done, what they can expect, who will ask the questions and how their responses will be kept confidential.

"Rushing into this would be a huge mistake," Beard says. "Employees have to feel their confidentiality is protected and [told] that the steps that will be taken will be developmental and focused, not punitive."

Townhalls and Competitions

Between 2012 and 2017, Ben Bradshaw, a partner at O'Melveny in Washington, served as the firm's talent development partner. While in this role, he says, his guiding philosophy was that the career of every attorney who works at the firm—regardless of how long—will be enriched by his or her experiences at the organization.

As part of this effort, he says, the firm ramped up its transparency and communication. For more than a decade, partners at the firm have conducted at least six town halls at each of its 15 global offices each year; the sessions are held in person, with occasional videoconferencing for employees outside the U.S. Topics have included the company's financial performance, paths to partnership, its commitment to pro bono work and its strategic vision for both its corporate and litigation departments.

One recent takeaway was that associates and counsel want real-time feedback, Bradshaw says.

"This resonated with a lot of partners, including myself, and we tried to address this," he says. As an example, after filing a summary judgement brief, he now gathers his team to break down what worked well, what didn't and ways

to improve in the future.

The firm has also increasingly emphasized the development of organic mentoring relationships. In 2011, March Mentoring Madness was introduced firmwide as a takeoff on March Madness, the National Collegiate Athletic Association's basketball tournament. During a several-week period, associates are teamed with a senior mentor and sometimes counsel. Each team receives points for accomplishing a series of tasks, such as reviewing a client's invoice or an associate's online profile. He says it's a fun way for partners, counsel and associates to develop strong relationships. Instead of winning an engraved basketball trophy, each member of the winning team receives a small prize like a \$50 restaurant gift certificate.

Likewise, preparing and evaluating self-reports are another opportunity for employees to work together. Bradshaw says this elaborate, annual process targets both associates and counsel, who complete an online self-evaluation. Their supervising attorney reviews the report, prepares a written evaluation and then personally delivers it to them. He says this approach, in effect since 2001, has enabled associates and counsel to discuss meaningful performance feedback, opportunities, experiences and career goals.

In at least three offices—Los Angeles, San Francisco and Washington—associates and counsel complete another online, annual survey tailored to their office. Associate committee representatives then present the results at a partner breakfast meeting. It's quite revealing, says Bradshaw, and offers partners an inside view of what associates and counsel at their office are thinking and feeling.

"We recognize we're not perfect and need to keep improving," says Bradshaw. "We're always listening and improving, trying to be more responsive."

Time, Money and Commitment

O'Melveny's culture is based on a deep commitment to its attorneys' professional development, no matter

how long they remain at the firm. That philosophy, combined with its consistent solicitation and delivery of a wide variety of feedback, are key reasons behind its high ratings on Vault.com, says Peter Zeughauser, chair and partner at the Zeughauser Group, a consulting firm in Newport Beach, Calif., which works with O'Melveny and specializes in working with large, global law firms.

While tweaks may be needed, he says, companies across industries can implement similar programs if they're willing to make the commitment and investment.

Consider Upward Review. It isn't cheap, but nothing beats face-to-face interviews, says Zeughauser, explaining that online surveys aren't as insightful. "You can't probe, you don't see the body language and don't develop a relationship of trust," he says.

To support such programs, he says, HR professionals must design processes that solicit and communicate staff feedback about their supervisors' behavior. Other systems need to benchmark supervisors' progress so they know where they stand.

Another step involves pairing bosses who are chronic underperformers with a "trusted adviser"—someone within the organization whom they can get to know and trust and who can advise them on workplace situations, challenges and opportunities. If improvement isn't made, HR may need to alter their responsibilities or even job title and compensation, Zeughauser says.

Building such programs requires patience and a long-term commitment, he adds.

"This is a cultural change that takes place as generations progress and transition," says Zeughauser. "You don't launch these programs one year and have changes the next year. Times have changed and expectations of the market for talent is different, so organizations need to be responsive to that."

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