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These Laterals Are Seen as a 'Huge Win' in the Talent War. Here's How Big Law Is Building Around 'Boomerangs'

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What You Need to Know

- Weil Gotshal & Manges, Morgan Lewis & Bockius, and Ropes & Gray are among the firms known for developing programs and processes to welcome back returning ex-partners.
- Many firms have expanded alumni networks to include not just those who go in-house, but also those who go to rival firms.
- “Firms that invest a lot of money into their alumni relations know that you don’t burn bridges,” one expert said.

As a greater number of partners decide to make multiple moves in their careers, several Am Law 100 firms have developed a home for so-called “boomerang” partners who leave and then come back—perhaps years later.

Law firms such as Weil Gotshal & Manges, Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, and Ropes & Gray, among others, are well known for developing programs and processes to welcome back returning ex-partners.

“For us, it’s a huge win” when an attorney returns, said Barry Wolf, longtime chair of Weil, in an interview. “When you bring someone back, you know who the person is, and they know you. They know what we are and what we aren’t. That increases the likelihood of success.”



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Morgan Lewis, meanwhile, has a “vibrant alumni program,” managing partner Steven Wall said. “We could have a partner leave us to go across the street to our most fierce competitor, but they would still be in the program.”

Lateral moves have become so commonplace in Big Law that even some elite law firms known for high retention experience a measure of outflow each year. But law firm leaders say how those exits are handled can have an impact on whether the departing attorney might give their prior firm a second look if circumstances change. Firms are investing in these

relationships because of the benefits of partners who they say are known commodities.

According to Weil, the firm has rehired 13 former attorneys since the beginning of 2023. Most recently, Weil added Latham & Watkins partners Doug Lumish and Jeff Homrig, both of whom practiced at Weil for a decade before moving to Kasowitz, Benson, Torres & Friedman and then to Latham.

"People leave firms for a variety of reasons," Wolf said, some of which are beyond the firm's control. But, how the firm handles a difficult departure can be the difference between that relationship remaining intact or being severed for good, he added.

"We always take the high road," he said. "We always talk well of people. We want them to have a positive experience even as they depart the firm. We are not going to do anything to upset that."

Wolf recounted the story of Chris Machera, a former associate who returned to the firm. In 2011, Machera had an opportunity at Goldman Sachs and decided to take it.

"When Chris was leaving, several people took him out for his 'going away' drinks," Wolf said. "Mike Aiello (chairman of Weil's corporate department) pulled him aside and told him that he will always have a home here."

Machera returned in 2016 and is now co-head of Weil's private equity practice. (Aiello himself, who now leads the firm's 600-person corporate practice, was also a boomerang).

According to Wall, Morgan Lewis' process for outgoing attorneys similarly keeps relationships intact.

"On those few occasions when partners decide to leave without our encouragement, I will tell them I want to be very transparent with them," Wall said. "I tell them I spend a good chunk of my time trying to convince people like them at other firms to join us. That their decision to leave is not a 'right' or 'wrong' decision, but one that I want to make sure they have all the right information on. Sometimes they still decide to leave. But neither myself nor the firm hold any ill will."

Wall said part of Morgan Lewis' alumni program is a password-protected portal where alumni can log in and get information on the firm—updates and other relevant information. He said the firm's alumni events often include people who are currently at other firms.

"When they are there, they are not an attorney at 'Jones & Jones,' but an alumni of Morgan Lewis," he said.

For its part, Ropes & Gray leaders noticed in 2017 that they were seeing more boomerang talent, so they decided to lean in. They created an initiative called the "Re-attorney" program.

"This was created because we saw a trend" of lawyers coming back, said Amy Ross, chief of attorney talent at Ropes.

The firm estimates that, since 2019, it has roughly 130 attorneys who have left the firm and returned.

"People often make assumptions when someone leaves a firm and why they decide to come back," said Jeff Katz, co-managing partner of Ropes' Boston office and co-hiring partner. "Once we saw a pattern (of people returning), we thought maybe our assumptions were wrong, and people do want to come back.

"We are a business," Katz added, "and it makes business sense to bring someone in who is a known commodity rather than someone you haven't met."

'Bridges Get Burned'

Dan Binstock, partner with recruiting firm Garrison, said the very nature of a departure can make that high road hard to take for some firms.

"Partners tend to come back when the door is left open, despite hurt feelings or scars," he said. "But the challenge is that so many high-profile, high-impact departures end with hurt feelings and betrayal, and the bridges get burned."

Amy Savage, also a partner at Garrison, noted that some firms "are being more aggressive" when it comes to losing partners.

Last year, Kirkland & Ellis made headlines in adopting a policy of withholding accrued compensation for departing partners, with observers saying that kind of clawback was "not uncommon" and could

influence others to move in a similar direction. Some lawyers have also discussed the use of longer so-called “gardening leave” periods and noncompete agreements to dissuade departures.

But regardless of some firm policies, the legal profession’s free-agent era has given rise to a class of “serial laterals”—those who have changed law firms three, four, even five or more times in just a handful of years, according to industry data, recruiters and consultants.

In such an environment, alumni programs have become even more crucial.

“When I look at a firm that has boomerang hires, they all have strong alumni programs,” Savage said.

“Dan (Binstock) and I have been doing this long enough to see the proliferation of these programs over the past 20 years,” she said. “They were primarily used to track people who went in-house.” That makes sense as a possible business opportunity for the firm. But Savage said that many firms have now expanded that network to include not just those who go in-house, but also those who go to rival firms. And they are putting resources behind it.

“Firms that invest a lot of money into their alumni relations know that you don’t burn bridges,” she said.

Law.com reported last year that large law firms, including Kirkland, are building out their alumni programs with events, websites, career development and coaches—taking a page from the playbook of programs at big consulting firms. Alumni programs have become more structured, robust and ingrained into firm DNA—and the programming is partly inspired by consulting firms.

‘Boomerang’ Decisions

Donny English, an employment litigation attorney at Morgan Lewis, said the combination of how his exit from the firm was handled and the culture of a place

he knew and enjoyed was enough to bring him back.

English wanted to be a first-chair trial lawyer, something that can be hard to accomplish as a younger attorney at a firm the size of Morgan Lewis. So, despite enjoying his time there immensely, he made a move.

“I was an aspiring trial lawyer who wanted to grow his practice and get his own clients,” English said. “I took that to Jackson Lewis and had some trial success and built a national practice.”

English said Morgan Lewis was supportive of his decision, and he maintained contact with friends at the firm while also becoming a part of its alumni network. Last year, his mentor, Grace Speights, reached out to him to see if he would be interested in returning to Morgan Lewis.

“Grace recruited me—mentored me while I was there, stayed in touch with me throughout my career progressions—and last spring we had a career conversation. She said Morgan Lewis needed a trial lawyer and asked if I was interested. It’s clear the firm cares about the people they practice with. Not just when they are in the building, but when they leave, supporting them throughout their journey,” English said.

At times, boomerang lawyers come back and wind up in leadership roles.

After leaving Katten Muchin Rosenman for an appointment in the Justice Department, Gil Soffer had a number of career options. But he said one reason he went back to Katten was how the firm handled his initial exit. He is now chair of Katten.

“It was hugely important,” he said in an interview. “I resigned my partnership to avoid conflicts. They said the door would be open when I came back, if I came back. But not only was the firm supportive of the move, they held my office for me. Not only was the door open, it was the same door.”