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"The Comeback, Kids: Gain a Recruiting Advantage By Bringing Back Departed Lawyers"

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There's been an awful lot written about what the legal profession can do to try to stop the flow of women leaving the profession after they have children and find 60-hour work weeks unsustainable. But I've seen very little written about how, once they've left the profession, firms can bring them back.

After all, few women intend to leave the work force permanently. Many would prefer not to have left at all but were unable to find a suitable part-time or telecommuting option.

Last year, I served on the State Bar of Texas' Task Force on Hiring, Retention and Promotion of Minority and Women Attorneys in Large and Medium Size Law Firms and Corporations. Once we caught our breath from saying the name of the group, we set about coming up with a list of recommendations for the bar, firms and corporations. The January report is available at the Bar's Web site, www.texasbar.com.

Among the means of improving diversity in the legal profession — one to which I actually hadn't given much thought before working on the task force — was how to entice women to come back after they've left. As it turns out, it's a fruitful area, and those firms and corporations that can re-woo the most talented lawyers will find themselves with an enviable work force.

** Low-cost CLE for inactive attorneys:* One of the most daunting parts of trying to re-enter the work force is getting up to speed on what has been happening since you left. Not only does the law change and develop on an almost daily basis, but legal technology moves so quickly that even the most computer-savvy lawyer will feel like a Luddite after being away from it for as little as a year. (Who am I kidding? Six months.)

Firms, the bar, in-house legal departments and other groups can tap into a vast demographic by targeting inactive lawyers and offering them get-up-to-speed CLE sessions for their particular areas of expertise. They can do the same on the technology front. Such an effort would provide women looking to transition from bottles to briefcases with a low-cost, user-friendly way to dip their toes back into the water.

** Keep in touch with alumnae:* Just as colleges keep track of their graduates (the better to hit them up for a new student center or endowed chair), firms and legal departments should keep tabs on the women who used to work for them. Many firms and legal departments may already do this informally on an individual basis, but making it policy would broaden their reach and provide them with a framework for keeping those connections strong.

Firms should send newsletters, job postings and other big communiqués to their alumnae. Even better, firms should host annual alumnae events, whether they're family-friendly picnics or ladies-only luncheons.

If firms aren't already doing so, they should also conduct exit interviews and survey women who have left the firm. Such interviews and surveys could net ideas for ways to make the firm more attractive to those women once they want to re-enter the job market.

Other ways firms and legal departments can draw returning women include starting women's initiative committees and mentoring circles, not to mention offering alternative work schedules and backup care for children and elderly family members.

The legal profession spends a lot of time and energy trying to keep women from leaving, and those efforts should continue. But there will always be talented women — women their employers have spent many hundreds of thousands of dollars training — who will opt to leave the work force.

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Given their training and the fact that they made it through law school and the bar exam, it's doubtful those women want to stay away forever. When the best and brightest of those women are looking to come back to work, smart firms and legal departments will have already put themselves in a position to take advantage of that decision.

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