

Beyond partner succession: planning for professionals who keep law firms running

June 8, 2026 | Betsy R. Landry, Diane M. Power | Articles

Longevity is an asset to law firms. It tells clients that the firm has been steady. It tells recruits that people can build a career there. It tells the community that the firm has put down roots and intends to keep showing up.

But there is another side to **longevity** that firms do not always talk about openly: When people stay for decades, they will eventually retire. And as more experienced professionals across the legal industry approach that stage of their careers, **succession planning**, can no longer be limited to partners, practice group leaders or client-facing attorneys.

Overlooked side of law firm succession

The “silver tsunami” is often discussed in terms of senior lawyers and client relationships. That is understandable. Partner transitions affect revenue, client confidence, and the future of practice groups. But law firms also rely on a deep bench of professionals who support the practice every day, including paralegals, legal assistants, human resources, finance, operations, IT, marketing, business development and other business support teams.

These professionals often know far more than their job descriptions capture. They know how work moves through the firm, where the exceptions are, which processes are documented and which ones have simply become part of the firm’s institutional memory. In some cases, they can even finish an attorney’s thought or sentence.

For firms with long-tenured teams, the question is not simply who will inherit a book of business; it is who will understand how the firm works when the people who have quietly held that knowledge for years begin



leaving the workforce.

That is why succession planning for professional staff should be treated with the same intentionality firms bring to partner transitions. It requires more than replacing a person when a retirement date is announced. It requires early conversations, thoughtful knowledge transfer, a willingness to rethink roles, and clear communication with the people who will be affected by the change.

Start the conversation before it becomes urgent

The first step is to talk about succession before it becomes uncomfortable or urgent. In law firms, retirement conversations can be delicate, particularly when they involve professionals whose contributions and relationships are deeply woven into the firm. Employees may not always be ready to talk openly about timing, but avoiding the topic only makes the eventual transition harder.

Early conversations allow the firm to plan in a way that is respectful to the retiring employee and helpful to everyone who depends on that role. Attorneys and department leaders can understand what is coming. Teams can prepare. The firm can avoid the sense of surprise that often creates anxiety.

Make knowledge transfer a priority

The second step is to build time for knowledge transfer. No one can download 30 or 40 years of experience into a manual. Some of the most valuable knowledge comes from judgment, relationships and context. But firms can still identify what is most critical and make sure it is not living only in one person's head.

That may mean building in overlap between a retiring employee and a successor or documenting standard procedures that have never been written down. It may also mean asking attorneys and colleagues what they rely on most in that position, or using technology to capture responsibilities, organize information, and create process documentation.

This is where artificial intelligence can play a constructive role. The goal should not be to use AI to replace people. It should be to help preserve

knowledge, streamline administrative work, and rethink processes in a way that supports the next generation of professionals.

A transition is also an opportunity to pause and consider whether a role should look the same going forward. Has the work changed? Are there responsibilities that should shift to another department? Are there new tools that may change what the role requires?

A retirement can create an opportunity to modernize the way work gets done.

Build internal paths for growth

One reason people stay with an organization for long periods of time is that they see a future for themselves. Succession planning should include honest conversations with current employees about how their roles may evolve, what responsibilities they may want to take on, and what professional growth looks like for them.

Not every transition results in a direct internal promotion, and not every employee wants to move into a management position. But that does not mean there is no opportunity.

Sometimes the better outcome is a thoughtful reshaping of responsibilities that allows several people to grow, rather than expecting one person to replace everything a retiring employee did.

At the same time, outside hiring remains important. Strong firms need a mix of continuity and fresh perspective. New employees bring different experiences, new ideas, and sometimes new comfort with technology and evolving workflows.

The goal should not be to recreate the past exactly but instead to carry forward what matters while preparing the firm for what comes next.

Make communication part of the plan

Finally, succession planning should include strong communications from the beginning. When a firm is recruiting for several roles at once, people may try to interpret what it means. Internally, employees may wonder whether more changes are coming. Externally, clients, candidates and referral sources may ask whether the firm is growing, restructuring or

reacting to unexpected departures.

That is why HR, firm leadership and marketing need to be aligned on timing, messaging and tone through each phase. The goal is not to over-explain every personnel decision. It is to communicate with enough clarity that people understand the firm is being thoughtful and proactive.

A retirement announcement can honor a long career. A hiring announcement can show investment in the future. A job posting can signal growth and continuity rather than uncertainty. In each case, the way the transition is communicated can either create questions or reinforce stability.

Ultimately, succession planning for law firms is not only about preparing for those who will leave. It is about protecting business continuity, organizational culture, and institutional knowledge so that attorneys and clients can keep moving forward with confidence.

Longevity should be celebrated, but the best way to honor it is to plan early, communicate clearly, and give the next generation of professionals the foundation they need to carry the firm into its next chapter.

Visit [Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly 's website](#) to access the full article,.