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Investing in the partners of the future

There was a time when, in order to be invited to join a UK partnership, the prerequisites were good lawyering skills, a long tenure at the firm and to be seen as a 'good egg' by the other partners. An aspiration for partnership was assumed and firms ran themselves profitably with minimal management intervention. This model was founded in a world with no price competition, minimal client pressure and limited requirements for efficient operations.

Indeed, with time expended as the basis for charging, it could be argued that the regime positively mitigated against efficiency improvements in lawyering, since no economic benefit was delivered. There were, of course, initiatives to reduce costs in order to boost profits, but the overriding focus was not necessarily on reducing prices to the client or delivering value-added services.

Today, a highly competitive market, more demanding clients and new market entrants all mean that laws firm must evolve to be a different sort of business and that partners need multifaceted skill sets in order to succeed. Whilst being a good lawyer is necessary, it is no longer sufficient. The role of the partner is broader and will continue to broaden as legal services are increasingly viewed by clients as 'just another thing I buy', with service performance being measured and value benchmarked across a wide range of factors and firms.

Investing in skills

It is, of course, easy to say that partners now need to be accomplished client work winners, relationship developers, project managers, coaches, mentors, team leaders, financial wizards and operational innovators. Walking this talk is somewhat more challenging!

To an extent, this is because firms do not invest in developing skills on the basis of the lifecycle of the lawyer from trainee onwards. To build for the future, it

is critical to craft an end-to-end strategy for legal, management and interpersonal skills development.

By putting in place the building blocks during the early years of a lawyer's career, exposing associates to management challenges and responsibilities early on rather than seeing their role as simple time-recording machines, the skills that will be needed to build business resilience and allow for succession will be created.

Simply promoting the best time recorders and then expecting them to undergo an overnight transformation to become rounded businesspeople and client advisors is delusional. It should be clear that the skills required for the future need to be built today on solid foundations.

“Craft an end-to-end strategy for legal, management and interpersonal skills development”

Playing to strengths

Also important to consider are individual strengths and weaknesses as part of building a rounded and balanced partner team. It is implausible to expect every partner to be equally competent across all aspects of the 'ideal partner' job description; there will be natural strengths and weaknesses. It seems more sensible, therefore, to create a set of core (and minimum) skills and behaviours for all partners and to then focus on tasking individuals to pursue excellence in the areas which play to their strengths.

It follows that different partners will make contributions to the firm's success which will vary in value, and so may command a different level of reward. Taking a soccer metaphor, the goalkeeper may

have a lower market value than the centre forward, but good players are needed in both positions for the team as a whole to succeed. It would be perverse to measure the goalkeeper on his ability as an outfield player and the striker as a shot-stopper (and to encourage them to invest time in becoming better at these non-core activities), yet this is just what a one-size-fits-all approach to partner performance management does.

In developing a model that is fair and transparent, but which does not pretend that all contributions are necessarily of equal value, it is important to engage in a mature and open conversation with partners. The progressive firm, in finding ways to allow individual partners to play to their strengths (within the context of the firm's overall business structure and objectives), also rewards them accordingly.

Eye on the future

To succeed in the future, partners will need skills that are simply not part of standard legal education; firms must act early and decisively to fill this void if they are to have a partnership which is able to build a dynamic, sustainable and successful business.

Some may argue this investment may be wasted if people ultimately pursue careers elsewhere. Consider the following an apocryphal conversation between two senior executives discussing the value of investing in training and development for their people. “What happens if we spend all that money developing our people and they leave?” laments one. “What happens if we don't and they stay?” retorts the other.

Invest now to secure your firm's long-term future. ■

Andrew Hedley has been advising law firm leaders on strategy and change management for more than 15 years (www.hedleyconsulting.com)