

**Career Planning for Lawyers:  
Why It Is Important, What It Looks Like,  
and Why Law Firms Should Invest in It**

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*Knowing others is intelligence; knowing yourself is true wisdom.  
Mastering others is strength; mastering yourself is true power. -- Tao Te Ching*

Lawyers are far behind their corporate clients, and even professionals in other professional service firms, in recognizing and appreciating the importance of taking control over their careers. The reason for this may lie in the fact that historically the career path of a lawyer was clear – go to a good law school and get good grades, join a major firm to get practical training, “sink or swim” through the process, and make partner. This traditional path has not, however, been available to most lawyers for many years. Yet, the mindset that still dominates in most law firms has not moved on substantially, and it continues to impact most severely the careers of women and minorities. So, given this mindset, what can individual lawyers do to develop their careers?

The most obvious answer is for each lawyer to define, for herself, her individual career objectives and become her own ardent advocate. Obvious, yes; but difficult to implement in practice -- particularly for hard-charging, high-performing lawyers who do not take the time to consciously and clearly articulate their goals and are not always skilled in the fine art of advocating for themselves. Nevertheless, despite these difficulties, individual lawyers can take charge of their careers *if* they make the time and space in their lives to *stop* and *pay attention* to where they are going. This is where professional coaching, as so clearly illustrated by the other authors in his Journal, can be of great assistance.

For most of us in the legal profession, however, stopping and paying attention to our own lives runs contrary to our natures (that is a topic for another article!). Therefore, unless we ourselves take the initiative (and incur the expense) to hire a personal coach to support us in connection with our career goals, it just does not happen. Yet, by failing to do so, we

end up proceeding through our careers in a reactive mode, without a clear idea of what we need to do, and who we need to be, in order to have a satisfying and fulfilling career. This impacts not only our quality of life, but also the quality of our work and the environment in which we do that work.

It is because, as lawyers, we do not tend to invest in clearly formulating our career (or, for that matter, our life) objectives and because our failure to do so negatively impacts our work environments that this article suggests and advocates that professional coaching should be incorporated as an integral part of a law firm’s professional development and diversity efforts. It articulates the benefits to law firms of having a focused career development program for their lawyers, and it makes the business case for investing in this effort. It concludes that dedicating a professional with executive coaching skill to support firm lawyers in one of the most important aspects of their lives – their careers – not only makes good sense, it also generates a return on the investment far in excess of the cost. The return on investment comes in the form of better recruiting results, higher retention rights, shorter learning curves, improved performance and capability, more well-rounded lawyers, increased client satisfaction, enhanced reputation, and higher profits.

***Why Career Planning Is Important to  
Lawyers and Firms***

Law firms generally invest heavily in the recruitment of star talent. In addition, they provide good support for the development of their lawyers’ substantive skills. Most do not, however, provide their lawyers with the individual support they need in order to help them identify their unique talents, round out their skills and abilities, and align their talents

with the firm's overall strategy. In addition, the inconsistency of development opportunities within the firm, office or practice group – for reasons ranging from partner work-styles, to inefficient or inequitable work assignment systems, to unconscious motivations relating to preferences, diversity and the like -- often leads to the dissatisfaction of those who perceive that the firm is providing better opportunities to some than to others.

By supplementing existing professional development efforts with a program that provides lawyers with the opportunity to develop, and be coached in relation to, customized, individual career development plans, and by dedicating an in-house professional to facilitate the process of ensuring that lawyers get the opportunities they need to develop targeted skills, firms can fill in these gaps and enhance their professional development efforts overall.

Developing a personal career plan is particularly important for associates and partners working in large firms. From the moment a young lawyer begins to work at a large firm, he submits to client needs and the shadow of the billable hour. In many cases, absent an institutionalized program to support his development, he does not stop to think about the direction his career, or for that matter his personal life, is taking until he wakes up one day, perhaps several years later, suddenly conscious of the fact that he is feeling overwhelmed, disillusioned and dissatisfied. This is often the result of poor professional development and career management planning. Had the lawyer developed a sense of purpose by defining a clear direction at the outset of his career, he would feel more confident about his career path, more empowered to make the decisions necessary to keep his career on track, and more resilient when subject to the set-backs that he will inevitably experience along the way.

Similarly, when a lawyer suddenly finds herself in the partnership ranks, she generally finds that numerous additional demands are suddenly placed upon her, such as marketing, client development, practice leadership, training and mentoring, committee

membership, budgeting, bill collecting, and the like – and all this in addition to maintaining her billable hours. A lawyer who has a clear sense of her self, her strengths and weaknesses, and her values and interests can more easily negotiate this change by identifying the types of responsibilities that she can take on and by advocating for herself in relation to the coaching and training she may need to help her to fulfill these duties.

By institutionalizing a program that supports the development of lawyers' career paths, firms not only encourage their lawyers to work purposefully toward their goals, they also engender increased loyalty, satisfaction and performance, which inevitably lead to increased profitability.

### ***What a Comprehensive Career Planning Program Looks Like***

The essence of career planning has been understood by mankind for millennia. It can perhaps best be summarized by the motto that Socrates learned from the Oracle at Delphi in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, B.C.: "*Know Thyself.*" It is only by knowing who we are – our strengths and weaknesses, our values, our passions, and our purpose – that we have a chance to achieve true success, happiness and personal fulfillment. Yet, as poets and philosophers have known throughout the ages, knowing oneself is one of life's most difficult and challenging tasks.

The other articles in this Journal give you an idea of what one-on-one career planning for lawyers can look like. This article describes how an internal coach (referred to here as a Career Development Officer), working as an integral member of a firm's professional development and diversity teams, can assist a lawyer to develop her career plan. The steps that can be taken include:

- identifying the lawyer's strengths, weaknesses, values and personal interests through her own self-assessment, through 360° feedback, and/or with the use of various assessments administered by the coach:
- assisting the lawyer to articulate her own career (and life) goals over the next 1 year, 3 years, 5 years, etc., and counseling

the lawyer on the practicality of those goals;

- determining how the lawyer's strengths and interests can be leveraged for her benefit and for the strategic benefit of the firm, and how weaknesses can be overcome or developed;
- developing a plan that includes manageable and measurable stretch goals to be achieved by the lawyer within defined time periods (e.g., substantive and executive skills to be developed, work assignments needed, exposure to partners and clients to be obtained, gaps to be filled, etc.);
- periodically monitoring and assessing the lawyer's progress in relation to her goals; and
- coaching her with regard to essential executive leadership skills she will need in order to succeed.

Although the lawyer will receive the support of the coach in terms of the continuous monitoring of her performance and adherence to her plan, she will be required to herself take ownership of the plan and responsibility for her own career development.

In addition to supporting the development of career plans, a Career Development Officer can also support the firm by working with senior lawyers to provide coaching at the critical, and highly stressful, point of partnership consideration and subsequent integration, and to provide coaching and consulting with regard to executive skills such as management and supervision, client relationship and development, marketing, communication, leadership, and mentoring.

### ***Why Law Firms Should Invest in Career Planning***

Set out below are the reasons why firms should invest in implementing a career development program as part of their professional development efforts. The business case ranges from enhancing recruiting and retention efforts to improving the bottom line. Here's how:

*Enhance Recruiting.* Today's law school graduates are not well prepared for the practice of law and they know it. In choosing a firm, they are looking for an environment in which they will receive top-notch training and thereby develop marketable skills. By providing individualized attention to associates and partners, a law firm with a clearly defined career development program has an edge over its competitors who do not provide programs of this type, and therefore becomes a "firm of choice."

*Strengthen Existing Professional Development Efforts.* Training and development programs are extremely useful development tools, but they only go so far. A Career Development Officer, acting as a coach, can supplement these efforts by working with individual lawyers to implement the learning they acquire in these programs and to assist them in the development of executive skills.

*Shorter Learning Curve.* The reality of today's marketplace is that there is no time to waste trying to "sink or swim" in the murky waters of the legal profession, trying to acquire skills in an *ad hoc* fashion. What's more, learning in such a manner is inefficient, stressful, costly and likely to irritate clients. Lawyers get up to speed much more quickly when they know where they are headed. By focusing attention and defining direction, individual lawyers can much more efficiently go about the task of acquiring the skills that they need to get there, and avoid being subject to the burden and stress of acquiring them haphazardly along the way.

*Improved Attorney Performance and Capability.* Focused attention on one's career goals, knowledge of one's strengths and weaknesses, and a clear sense of one's professional identity lead to increased performance, capability and confidence. When a lawyer is empowered with this awareness, both lawyer and firm can better align themselves to achieve the firm's strategic objectives.

*Satisfaction and Retention.* Law firms make large investments in the recruitment and training of their lawyers. When a young associate leaves her firm before the break-even point in her second or third year due to lack of

professional development opportunities (which is the most frequent reason cited for a departure), her firm suffers a real financial loss (i.e., loss of initial investment and replacement and outplacement costs). By having a Career Development Officer to support associate professional development, firms can substantially improve the level of associate satisfaction and thereby recoup the cost of investing in this effort.

*Diversity.* Underlying much of the dissatisfaction expressed by associates is the issue of diversity. Notwithstanding that most firms now understand the business case for diversity, for a variety of reasons, certain associates are consistently given better development opportunities than others. In my experience, many of these reasons are not the result of intentional discrimination, but rather arise from unconscious biases that we all carry. It's pretty simple. We naturally gravitate towards people who are like us (e.g., white men gravitate towards other white men). In order to effectively address the inequities that arise from these unconscious biases, law firms need someone to regulate and monitor the work given to individual associates, and these biases need to be surfaced in a safe way so that the impact that they have on the development of minorities and women can be overcome. Professional coaches are generally skilled at surfacing these biases, when working one-on-one with their clients.

*Loyalty, Morale and Culture.* In exchange for their hard work and long hours, associates *expect* top-notch training; it is part of the implicit contract that they make with their firm. The higher the quality of the training and development program, the more positively the associates view their firm's commitment to them. Lawyers who receive the benefit of customized development plans get the message more clearly than others that the firm is investing in them because they are valued assets. This perception engenders a sense of loyalty and satisfaction in the associates, which has a direct impact on the culture of the firm and morale generally.

*Alumni.* Law firms are coming to appreciate the importance of their alumni. Not only are they important sources of ongoing business, they also can have a direct impact on a firm's

reputation in the marketplace. Law firms that ensure that their lawyers have a positive experience overall while at the firm enjoy better reputations in the marketplace and are more likely to receive referral business from lawyers that leave. Even lawyers who depart from a firm at the firm's request can leave with a sense of loyalty if they understand and appreciate the efforts that the firm made in connection with their development and they receive meaningful outplacement counseling prior to their departure from the firm's Career Development Officer.

*Emotional Intelligence.* Most firms do great jobs at developing their lawyers' substantive skills, but little to assist them in developing the executive leadership skills that they need to be good lawyers. We have all heard a story of the brilliant Law Review editor who had such poor interpersonal skills that neither partners nor clients wanted to work with him. The good news is that these skills, now referred to as EQ or emotional intelligence, can be developed with the sincere and concerted effort of the individual. Corporations have long recognized that the difference between executives who are mediocre and those who progress to senior leadership positions are primarily attributable to emotional intelligence factors rather than cognitive abilities (i.e., nearly 90% of the difference in the profiles of the executives who rise to the top and those who remain in middle management is attributable to EQ, not IQ). The lesson here: intelligence is important so by all means go after the best and brightest; but intelligence only goes so far; at the senior (partner) level EQ is equally, if not more, important. Assisting individuals to develop EQ is the primary province of the executive coach.

*Business and Management Skills.* Most law firms do not teach their lawyers good business and management skills. However, in today's market, more and more clients are demanding that their lawyers have these skills. By identifying the skill set required by lawyers, and developing a comprehensive career development plan that includes the development of these skills, clients are better served, work overall becomes more efficient,

and good business practices become the norm of the firm.

*Increased Client Satisfaction and Loyalty.* Again, it's simple. Better trained and more well-rounded lawyers translate into increased client satisfaction and loyalty, which in turn translates into increased profitability.

The investment that lawyers make in their careers is one of the biggest investments that they will make in their lifetimes. In addition to making an investment of time and money in acquiring their education and progressing through their careers, they also seek to define their professional identities. In exchange for the hard work and grueling hours that lawyers invest, they should be entitled to their firm's support in helping them to shape this identity and achieve their goals. By helping lawyers to take charge of their careers, shape their professional identities, maximize their potential, and align their careers with their firm's strategy, firms are also enhancing their own performance by becoming more efficient and therefore more profitable.

In conclusion, every lawyer should take charge of her career by dedicating the time and effort necessary to develop an individual career plan that aligns with her own unique set of strengths, weaknesses, values and interests. In so doing, the lawyer not only puts herself on a path towards a successful and fulfilling career; her firm also gains substantial benefits by having a high performing fee-earner aligned with their overall strategic objectives. Rather than leave it to lawyers to develop their career plans on an *ad hoc* basis, firms should support them in this effort. One of the ways that they can do this is to make meaningful career planning an integral part of their professional development and diversity efforts.

It just makes sense.

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