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Developing Talent

Marcie Areias

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Investing in attorney development is critical to the success of any law firm, regardless of its size. "Managing attorney talent is no longer seen as an option, but rather as an integral part of law firm management," explained Ida Abbott, [an Oakland consultant](#) who focuses on lawyer professional development. With the recession drastically shrinking recruiting efforts and attorney numbers, firms must focus on retention and training for a broader skill set.

Over the last few years, the number of firms with personnel dedicated specifically to attorney development has been on the rise. "It isn't that attorney development concepts are changing, but the implementation and resources dedicated to such efforts are," said Abbott. Now, large law firms have departments focused specifically on development efforts, and smaller firms are appointing partners and committees to handle such matters.

Clients' heightened expectations are a major driving force behind the focus on attorney development. Today, clients give added scrutiny to bills, negotiate alternative fee arrangements, do more work in house, and work with contract attorneys. "If law firms are going to respond to the call by clients to add value, they need to deploy their attorney development resources effectively, which requires attention to all aspects of talent management," explained Sandee Magliozzi, director of professional development and externships at Santa Clara University School of Law. "In these changing times, developing a pipeline of talent that matches what clients want is critical." Firms are starting to do this by providing more focused and sophisticated training that aligns with client needs, and by opening lines of communication between firm management and attorneys.

FOCUSED AND SOPHISTICATED TRAINING

While substantive legal training has been around for years, law firms constantly update and develop programs to keep up with industry demands and trends. Right now, the focus is on (1) providing professional skills training, (2) implementing on-demand learning platforms, and (3) offering leadership and management coaching for partners.

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS TRAINING

In the legal industry, the name of the game is adding value to clients. Providing exceptional substantive legal advice at a fair price is not enough. To be effective in this competitive economy, firms must take

client service to the next level. Clients value and expect certain professional skills from their attorneys, including everything from efficient communication and flexibility, to reliable and adaptable leadership styles.

For example, one San Francisco Bay Area client explained, "What I really value but don't get enough of are prompt responses to my questions. Even though I may not need an answer right away, I value knowing I am on the radar. This kind of communication leaves me with a good feeling about my relationship with outside counsel." Until recently, client management training has been underemphasized, especially at the associate level. But proactive firms are beginning to train their attorneys on these and other professional skills that are critical to client development.

How to implement effective professional skills training depends on a law firm's resources and culture. For example, firms with dedicated professional development staff incorporate professional skill learning into their existing programming or even devote entire training sessions to it. "At varying experience levels, we teach skills such as client service, tailored communications, negotiating, supervising and optimizing core strengths," explained Larry Brown, senior manager of training and professional development at Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati. Some firms are also drilling down at the practice group level to ensure accurate attorney benchmarks are set. Evaluations that previously focused solely on substantive skills are starting to also include crucial professional skills.

In a smaller law firm setting, where professional skills tend to develop more organically, management is starting to monitor the process more strategically. "Because we have a small office, partners are able to monitor associates' workload individually and ensure that the right skills are developed," said Leon Tuan, partner at Stein & Lubin. "As managing partner, I work with a team to track progression by developing strategic plans for each associate." Some small firms are starting to include associates, even at the junior level, in client development training because it creates a sense of investment in the firm. "We've started using our marketing department to assist with professional skills training which is open to partners and associates," explained Sean White, partner at Archer Norris. "The more engaged our associates are with clients, the more satisfied they are with the work and the more likely they will stay to become the next firm leaders."

ON-DEMAND LEARNING PLATFORMS

As technological capabilities expand, they will play an increasingly instrumental role in attorney development. Recognizing increasing time pressures and differing learning preferences, law firms are posting recorded training sessions online where attorneys can watch them on demand. "It is critical that we enhance our traditional live classes by offering training resources that are accessible when and how our attorneys and staff need them," said Brown.

In 2008, Wilson Sonsini rolled out its on-demand learning to attorneys and staff, and in 2010 launched a separate site for clients. "Our on-demand learning platform isn't limited to just uploading recorded presentations online. It also allows users to customize their training experience around their learning needs and preferences," explained Brown. Wilson Sonsini's on-demand learning platform goes well beyond a simple audio format by including video, slides, presenter transcripts, downloads to a portable player, full-text searchability and even CLE credit. "The system caters to the viewers' needs in that they can view full programs or just a needed segment, bookmark selected points for reviewing at any time and choose the learning method they want — audio, video, download or transcript," said Brown. "Attorney and client usage is climbing, with client usage in the last quarter of the just-completed California CLE period up four-fold from last year."

As more firms start using on-demand platforms, the industry is expected to next add functionality like enabling users to view clipped portions of presentations as stand-alone segments, and perhaps even share those clips with colleagues to speed just-in-time learning and responsive service. Additionally, some law firms plan to begin syncing legal and professional skills courses with attorney competency lists, allowing attorneys to utilize trainings directly related to their career development needs.

COACHING LAW FIRM LEADERS

Technology makes training convenient, but nothing compares to partners having effective leadership and management skills. Recognizing this, law firms are training partners specifically in these areas to make them even better equipped with the tools necessary to manage their clients and attorney teams. Giving a partner the tools needed to lead is an investment that will benefit everyone in a firm.

Coaching can be implemented in a variety of ways. There is a trend toward bringing in outside consultants to provide one-on-one sessions for specific areas where attorneys want to become better. "There is a greater acceptance in the legal field of coaching not just for remedial purposes, but to become better leaders," said consultant Abbott. Some firms are partnering with university business schools to teach leadership and management skills from the business perspective. For firms with smaller budgets, outside consultants can be brought in to provide structure, assess objectives and conduct leadership training. "The key to any type of attorney development program is support for it and the attorneys in it," explained Abbott. Offering leadership and management coaching is one way firms are showing support to current and aspiring leaders.

OPENING LINES OF COMMUNICATION

Attorney development efforts are only valuable if the attorneys they serve know about them; therefore, law firms must have effective communication plans in place. Open communication will positively impact morale which plays a big part in motivation and development. "Knowing that my firm has a strategy in place focused on my success makes a huge difference in my outlook and increases my motivation," said one San Francisco-based attorney. "It matters to me that my firm cares enough to invest in resources and meet me halfway in my development."

Methods of communicating across generations and attorney levels are constantly evolving. Some firms have started communicating via monthly newsletters about upcoming trainings, while other firms communicate through practice group leaders. Regardless of how communication occurs, it is the key to credibility. To achieve this, firms should send information only to those attorneys it pertains to and avoid mass e-mails. For example, a "Merger and Acquisition 101" training reminder should be sent only to attorneys in that group at the junior level. "If I get an e-mail and it doesn't pertain to me, I am less likely to open the next one that might," said a midlevel corporate associate. "It is easy for certain communication to become a nuisance and sending me something unrelated to my practice will lead to me ignoring all communications in the future."

THE TIME IS NOW

Investing in attorney training and development is on the rise and will continue to evolve. Client demands will keep driving attorney development trends, and firms will adapt in ways that make sense for their structures. Law firms should be thinking about what role attorney development plays in their culture and implement strategies accordingly. While there are many forms attorney development programs can take, one thing remains consistent — training, developing and retaining the best talent is instrumental to the continued success of law firms.

Marcie Areias is a career adviser at Golden Gate University School of Law, where she writes, presents and advises on professional development topics. Prior to joining Golden Gate, Marcie was a corporate attorney for Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher.

In Practice articles inform readers on developments in substantive law, practice issues or law firm management. Contact Vitaly Gashpar with submissions or questions at vgashpar@alm.com.