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Media & Communications Corner: Weaving External Marketing and Communications into Professional Development

An interview with Sharon Meit Abrahams, Director of Professional Development, McDermott Will & Emery LLP (Miami).

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Sharon Meit Abrahams, a member of this newsletter’s Board of Editors, is one of the true leaders of law firm professional development. One of the pioneers in the early 1990s who helped launch this discipline for law firms, she was the first to hold such a position without a law degree. What she brought to the table was a deep background in adult learning theory, thanks to a doctorate in adult education, and experience gained from an early career in the corporate sector. With that, she has helped blaze a trail for the other law firm professional development personnel who have followed this career path.

Abrahams is currently Director of Professional Development at McDermott Will & Emery, LLP in Miami, and has served with the firm for eight years. Prior to that she was Director of Professional Development and Training at Greenberg Traurig for eight years. Before entering the legal sphere, Abrahams began her career in the corporate world, serving as a training manager for the largest bank in Florida, and subsequently in the health care and insurance sectors.

A prolific author, Abrahams has published many articles on the topic of professional and/or career development in the legal environment, as well as one book. She has also held three positions as an adjunct professor/instructor at three universities.



Program Success: Driven from the Top

When asked what makes a professional development program successful, Abrahams says it depends largely on the support received from top management.

“One hundred percent support from the top management is the only thing that will make a professional development program truly successful in all aspects,” she says. “Though individual programs can be excellent, only when a coordinated, comprehensive program is supported and driven from the top can there be true success.”

The Role of Marketing

Abrahams says that her job, every day, is about marketing, both within the firm and to external audiences.

“First, I market all day long. I have to sell, sell, sell the training to the attendees and to their supervising attorneys. I have to sell new training ideas to top management. I have to sell that our comprehensive training program is the reason why people should come to the firm and that it’s a reason to stay at the firm.”



Abrahams also says her role is also to help the marketing department by providing programs that teach marketing to attorneys.

“We do tons of marketing training for all levels,” she says.

Abrahams also notes that marketing plays a significant role in promoting how the firm approaches training and professional development to potential recruits, clients and other key audiences.

“I market what we do through my publications and speaking engagements. I believe the more people know about the great training we offer the more people will want to join the firm and that clients will trust that our people are well trained and not always on their nickel.”

And Abrahams has some significant initiatives and programs to tout. She created McDermott University in 2004, and it serves as the firm’s comprehensive training program. It covers core skills, aligned training, mentoring and career planning.

“Under this umbrella we also do many initiatives and learning institutes,” says Abrahams. “We also have three diversity committees ‘ gender, racial and ethnic, and LGBT.”

Other initiatives implemented at McDermott include a women’s leadership training, women’s business development, Harvard Business School leadership training, LGBT awareness training, the Advanced Litigation Training Institute, quick-start business development, and secondment programs (both internal and client).

Looking to the Future

As she considers where law firm professional development departments and programs will go in the future, Abrahams believes much will be gained from continuing to recruit those from outside the legal sector.

“I think as firms start to hire professional educators out of the corporate world, the quality of training will be improved. Lawyers really don’t understand how to design curricula and how to put together a comprehensive integrated education program.”

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