LEGAL PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Practice Innovations: The pandemic pivot and client development training in the post-COVID-19 era

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Even amid the current pandemic, there are actions law firms can take to guide their lawyers in the right direction for vital client development activities

Since March, law firms have had to rethink how they do most everything. One important topic — among many others — is how to continue training younger associates on client development skills.

The first priority of young lawyers is to develop the knowledge and skills needed as a lawyer, of course, but there are actions law firms can take to guide associates in the right direction for preliminary client development activities as well. New clients take time to ripen, but the seeds can be planted early and watered often throughout associate lawyers' early career. Most associates are working remotely now, so the following can be accomplished in the new virtual work environment.

First, begin with an honest conversation about how client development efforts impacts the future of the firm in order to give associates motivation for an early start. Using your firm's standards and guidelines, explain how these efforts effect the bottom line, partnership consideration, compensation, and bonuses. Many associates embrace firm mythologies about how compensation is calculated and make assumptions based on these myths. Firm leaders should clear up any misunderstandings and give a truthful explanation of how client development efforts play into compensation and bonus decisions.

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Though learning the law is primary for young attorneys, firms can explain that certain client development behaviors, if started now, can become fruitful in the future. The easiest and most basic step is the development of a contact list. Most firms have software that can manage contact lists so this training should be early in the associates' career and is probably already in an online format. Be sure to encourage associates to think about contacts they might have beyond their current job, such as through family, friends, social networks, social media, and past employment. If a contact list is built at the start of an associate's legal career, it will gain invaluable business potential by the time the associate makes partner.

Taking people to breakfast, lunch, or coffee is currently not an option (depending on the location of the firm), but there are other ways to stay in touch with contacts, and examples include emailing interesting articles, distributing a post from the law firm's blog, and setting up phone calls. Over the past few months, many firms have jumped on the newest way to stay in front of clients and potential clients by offering videos and webinars. Greg Fleishmann, Director of Global Business Development & Marketing at Sidley Austin says his firm is "adapting our learning programs to include, for example, technical training around the use of technology tools such as video conferencing and webinar platforms."

Firms need to encourage associates to develop new relationships outside the firm by explaining that clients often come from those people who know and trust them. Ask associates to join organizations that they will enjoy and stick with for years. Find examples from partners where the client relationship was established from a charity, social club, or volunteer activity. Make it clear to associates that even though these endeavors currently may not be in person, that should not deter them from searching for organizations they can align with and support remotely.

Building after development

Building client relationships is part of client development, but it addresses different goals. Client development training is focused on generating *new* business; relationship training is geared towards building on *current* client relationships. Kaushi Muthukuda, Career Development Manager at Warner Norcross + Judd explains that "relationship-building and patience are the two most important client development skills any attorney can possess."

Relationship training programs that assist associates in developing their interpersonal communication skills, such as communication skills and emotional intelligence (EQ), have benefits beyond building client relationships. These skills foster better working relationships, makes the associate more relatable, and can expand work opportunities. Julia Mercier, Director of Learning, Development & Well-Being at Winston & Strawn, explains that a good relationship-building program can "teach young associates key interpersonal and practice management skills such as emotional intelligence and communication skills, matter management skills, relationship building and networking."

Indeed, the overarching goal of a good relationship-building program is to enhance an attorney's interpersonal skills, especially those skills around listening, questioning, and empathy. Further, one key component of client relationship skills is *emotional intelligence*, and it's been shown that attorneys with high EQ achieve greater success than their colleagues. EQ improvement involves a good amount of self-work, so online training would not promote behavior change, but can introduce EQ as a worthwhile area for self-improvement.

Kelly Druten Green, Senior Manager of Professional Development at the labor and employment law firm Ogletree Deakins, says the firm "subscribes to the philosophy that junior attorneys should focus primarily on becoming excellent attorneys."

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However, part of being a great attorney, Druten Green explains, is providing top-notch client service. "For junior attorneys, those clients are often internal stakeholders," Druten Green explains, adding that law firms should explain that firm partners will be the associates' *first* clients. Training should include what constitutes excellent client service, such as responsiveness and managing expectations, she says.

Associates have different substantive learning needs depending on their years of practice and the same is true for client development skills. Marlene Kane, National Director of Professional Development at McMillan explains how her firm developed a checklist "for our associates that identifies specific things they should be doing at different stages of their career." Most firms understand that younger associates need to absorb and perform the tasks that align with their knowledge and ability level; so, a typical client development curriculum would be broken into three associate categories: *i*) juniors with 1 to 3 years of experience; *ii*) mid-level associates with 4 to 6 years; and *iii*) seniors with 6 years or more.

Below is a simple example of how the same skill is expanded by level of experience:

Juniors	**Mid-levels**	**Seniors**
Creating contact lists	Building relationships	Managing clients
Internal networking	External networking	Pitching clients
Reputation building	Developing a niche	Speaking & publishing

The recent disruptions due to the pandemic have caused, and will continue to cause, the practice of law to change. However, the need for younger lawyers to trained in the art of client development will not change. With some creativity and a few adjustments, law firms can embrace new ways to provide this client development training to their younger lawyers.

However, it is important to remember that no matter how much training a firm offers, associates still need to be *proactive* in developing their own style and techniques for client development.

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