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Survey Says: New Partner Training Is a Key Component of Law Firm Success

By Sharon Meit Abrahams

The annual partner nomination season is fast approaching, prompting law firms to delve into rigorous discussions about suitable candidates. Though the selection criteria may differ across firms, there are universally accepted competencies that influence the decision-making process.

In a recent survey by the Young Partners Accelerator, respondents were asked to rank five core competencies in order of their significance. Predictably, possessing profound legal knowledge and skills secured the top spot with 50% of the vote. Business development skills trailed behind at 22%. Meanwhile, case and matter management received 17% of the votes. Understanding the business of law secured 9%, and leadership skills anchored the list with 2%.

However, an intriguing disparity emerged from the same survey: despite these clear competency expectations, a mere 7% of respondents indicated that their firms offered any structured partner training, either before or after the promotion. Larry Campagna, Managing Shareholder at Chamberlain, Hrdlicka, White, Williams & Aughtry, P.C., lamented the common sentiment: “Too many firms elect partners and expect them to learn by osmosis.” He highlighted that his firm prioritizes “professional training opportunities.” Notably, a majority believed that structured training would increase productivity, profitability, and retention. Frank Sheppard, managing partner, Rumberger Kirk emphasized, “Training needs to begin when they are young lawyers, and that learning never has an end date.”

New partners’ concerns were also spotlighted in the survey. A significant 43% were anxious about origination credit, reflecting Steve Mabey, Managing Director at Applied Strategies’, observation that they aren’t just concerned about expanding their practice, but also the repercussions of raised rates on their clientele. Many overlook the ramifications of their promotion on existing and potential clients.

After origination credit, reaching practice area goals was the second topic on the attorneys’ minds. Although it may sound like it could be the same as origination credit, it actually encompasses objectives such as client satisfaction enhancement, growth acceleration, or regional expansion. It makes sense that this would be an area of concern because many firms do not explain or announce their strategic goals across the firm. Not knowing what objectives have been set leaves new partners at a disadvantage when striving to reach practice-specific goals.

Surprisingly, the perception of colleagues ranked third, revealing an undercurrent of tension. Allegra Lawrence-Hardy, co-founder of Lawrence & Bundy, commented on the challenge new partners face, explaining that with a title elevation and a subsequent rate hike, new partners could find themselves less appealing to their colleagues, negatively impacting their billable hours. Once a new partner gets "behind the eight ball" they may never fully recover to meet partner expectations.

The survey offered recipients five topics to rank regarding what new partners worry about, but consultant, John Remsen, of Managing Partner Forum, voiced that young partners are also grappling with overarching questions such as "What am I buying into? What's the long-term plan? Are we keeping up with the incredible pace of change in the profession?" Addressing such pivotal concerns is the cornerstone of the Young Partners Accelerator program.

A comprehensive analysis of feedback from respondents reveals two dominant themes. The first theme is that some firms believe their informal training prepares their attorneys for partnership. However, caution must be exercised as informal learning may not be absorbed adequately since the individual may not be in the right learning mode to receive what is being taught. Wilson Elser, a 1,000 attorney firm, believes it is important to augment their informal training of mentoring and shadowing with a formal new partner orientation. This firm is large enough to offer an in-house training program to a class of new partners. Small and mid-size firms rarely have the resources to provide such training programs.

The second theme (and one that carries the burden of being the future of the firm) is how much effort is involved in business development at the partner level. Business development can be challenging for new partners who may not have the necessary skills or experience to succeed in this area. Some new partners may become overwhelmed by the increased responsibility and fail to meet anticipated standards which can lead to attrition.

By investing in its next generation of attorneys, a firm is investing in its future. Training is an investment of money and time that will pay off. Specifically, training new partners helps them develop the necessary skills to become successful attorneys and eventually leaders in their firms. This investment demonstrates the commitment the firm has to the young partner which will reduce attrition and enhance engagement. According to Stuart Oberman of Oberman Law, "The retention of a newly promoted associate to partner is critical to the long-term success of any law firm."

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