



The road ahead

The career priorities for an assistant are pretty clear. They must hone professional skills. Values focus on completing tasks on time, accuracy and being punctual.

As they make the transition to associate they need to make what, for some, is the first fundamental shift, from an internal, task-oriented focus to an external, client-results orientation. Skills are more about delegation and communication. An associate's values are about meeting clients' needs and time use shifts from being punctual and obeying orders on time to supervising assistants, project managing and building relationships with clients.

One of a number of potential sticking points at the stage of becoming an associate from being an assistant is the failure to delegate sufficiently. A number of associates have confessed in coaching sessions that they do the easy things themselves rather than giving them to assistants because it is quicker to get it done and know it has been done right. It is a habit they need to break and it is easier to do it at this level than later on. It may not show up as a big problem for the firm at this point, although it will affect the individual's time management adversely, but if people do not begin to learn to pass work down at an earlier stage, it will become much harder later on. The consequences will eventually impact the firm as a whole: partners who under-delegate operate less profitably, have less time to develop future business and give their staff fewer opportunities for development.

Associate to partner

- Skills: winning work, business management skills.
- Values: client satisfaction, growing client base, future earnings.
- Time use: managing client portfolio, training juniors, supervising quality.

Most firms have laid down (although not always transparently) the criteria needed to achieve partnership, which cover a range of non-legal skills. Candi-

In the second of two articles on coaching promising young lawyers to partnership, **Andrew Bass** and **Clio Demetriades** chart a roadmap through the transitions from assistant to managing partner

dates will need to produce evidence of management contribution in staff development, marketing, strong cash management and people management, as part of general 'good citizenship'.

A key snagging point here is in the willingness, confidence and ability of lawyers to bring in business. Many people who enter law school are simply unaware that this will be a requirement; it does not fit with their professional identity as a lawyer and often does not suit their temperament. But the truth is that firms are — and have always been — founded, built and sustained by finders of work and that, relatively speaking, competent implementers are two a penny.

The same principles should apply when considering individuals as lateral hires. Inevitably there will be gaps in the portfolio and they tend to appear most alarmingly when partners leave the business.

Partner to 'manager of partners'

- Skills: consensus building, influence.
- Values: whole office/practice area, not just their own practice area, businesses success.
- Time use: less client work, key clients, coaching partners, management of support functions.

It is difficult enough to ensure that every partner possesses the social skills, drive, intuitive powers and exceptional practice ability to win and satisfy new clients — now we are asking them to be the next generation of business managers as well.

The hard fact is that until firms embrace the concept of having professional, non-fee earning management teams, the very important issues of business and people management must fall to the partners of the firm. The new attributes required at this level include:

- skills: consensus building, influence;
- values: whole office/practice area, not just their practice area, businesses success; and

- time use: less client work, key clients, coaching partners, management of support functions.

One of the pitfalls in making this transition is succumbing to the temptation to favour your best personal clients, rather than practice area as a whole. This is very easy to do, since it is likely to be comfortable, remunerative and give the general reassuring sense that one has a practice of substance.

This is a major transition which requires a substantial shift in perspective and behaviour. Even for someone willing and able, it can take time. Despite best efforts to plan for the future and develop someone from within, there are many occasions when a firm needs to recruit specifically in order to have the succession in place for a retiring head of department.

From manager of partners to firm managing partner

- Skills: strategic thinking, ability to communicate a motivating vision, consensus-building.
- Values: success of firm as a whole.
- Time use: coaching practice area heads, 'state occasions', succession management.

Although many enlightened practices are now hiring in finance, human resources (HR) and IT expertise at senior management level, the

received wisdom is still that to ensure buy-in from the full partnership, a managing partner needs the authority to act which comes with respect for the badge. This means your firm is likely to be electing its next leader from among the current partners.

And if they do not yet possess the business management skills you need then quite simply the business may fail. Again there are many pitfalls: the temptation to favour your practice area rather than firm as a whole is an obvious one which dents morale and creates resentment.

More broadly, a new managing partner is often required to overhaul the firm in some way. This demands ability in change management: yet another skill set — and one quite far off from the skills required to be a good lawyer.

In short, the firm needs to recognise that the leap from manager of partners to managing partner will be the biggest shift yet in terms of it requiring skills beyond those of any good lawyer. This makes it quite risky. Firms might well prefer to elect a managing partner from their peer group, but the peer group does not necessarily provide the best talent pool for a managing partner. ■

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CREATING A SUCCESSION PIPELINE

1. Clarify the transitions and their demands as they relate to your specific firm. Involve people widely in the discussion, rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all or centrally-developed structure. This is very engaging stuff because it impacts on the career of every individual in the firm — the debate will be lively and it all helps buy-in.

2. Do not let people get themselves caught on a plateau. Draw attention to the upcoming changes in demands. The parable of the boiled frog tends to stick in the memory: a frog placed in hot water will jump straight out. But a frog placed in cold water will not notice the temperature rising if it happens slowly enough and will remain immobile until it boils to death. This illustrates a general principle of perception — there is a minimum threshold below which change is not noticed.

3. Ensure that 'transition thinking' is incorporated into your hiring and assimilation of lateral hires. Not only are they joining a new firm, with a new culture, but if they are moving up as well as across, are they mentally prepared for the change in skills, priorities and time use appropriate to the new level?

4. Recruit in advance to deal with potential senior succession issues. This can be considerably more rewarding than recruiting on an ad hoc basis. Being forced to think about long-term needs allows you to create a unique role, rather than it simply being yet another fee earning position — and this is a very attractive and uncommon prospect in this age of people feeling that they are only as good as their

last deal. This approach allows you to take your time and not be panicked into taking the first reasonably senior person who comes along.

5. Provide coaching through the transitions. Most people who are busily focused on day-to-day client issues need help to step back and identify and plan for the changes in skills, priorities and time use that they must make. It is invaluable to have them develop a transition plan when they are made up to the next level (especially at the most senior levels). For example, on promotion, what do they want to achieve at the end of the first day, first week, first, second and third months? How will they know they have successfully hurdled the plateau and caught the next upward curve?

6. Remember the support and functional staff areas too. Their transitions will be different, but the overall S-curve dynamic still holds. There are plenty of IT people whose careers top out because they cannot speak in the language of a user, or HR people who cannot escape a procedural mindset in order to contribute to achieving strategic objectives.

7. Give serious consideration to bringing in senior non-legal management. Recognise how much the preceding discussion is demanding over and above the requirement to be an excellent professional lawyer. Looking at the wider world, the majority of successful business models depend on specialising functions, rather than expecting everyone to be a renaissance all-rounder.