

Business & Careers

Law firms looking within for leadership

New role an 'emotional transplant' from independence to teamwork

MEGAN O'TOOLE

At first glance, a lawyer may not be an obvious fit for a management role. As lawyer and sociologist Anita Lerek notes, the traditional law-firm environment is all about output and being measured "by your size" — the size of your book, of your client base, of your hours. Good managers, however, must move beyond the realm of personal achievements to focus on constructing an effective team.

"This is like an emotional transplant for most lawyers, who for the first time are being asked to trade in their own lawyerly, ingrained, independent performance values for social, people values and skills," says Lerek, the president of Toronto-based legal recruitment firm Advocate Placement Ltd.

But as firms today merge, grow and expand their scope, the demand is rising for new layers of management — people who understand and can oversee large corporations. Rather than turning to outsiders and experienced business administrators, many firms are looking to recruit from within their own ranks.

Lawyer Shawn McReynolds, a managing partner of Davies Ward Phillips & Vineberg, says big law firms tend to feel more comfortable handing the reins over to one of their own; a lawyer, after all, is ideally positioned to understand the unique challenges facing their firm. "High-performing lawyers simply seem unwilling to invest the highest authority to outsiders," McReynolds says. Buoyed by this inherent advantage, lawyers who want to climb the corporate ladder would do well to learn the other side of the industry, experts say. People skills, and the ability to lead all members of the team — from partners to law clerks — are a must, says lawyer Karen Yolevski at Basman Smith.

Yolevski, who is not a manager at her firm but has participated in numerous discussions about management structure, says would-be CEOs must be able to synthesize and develop solutions based

on the opinions of many partners, which can often prove "a difficult task." They need diplomacy, time-management skills and a track record of showing leadership on controversial files.

"The person has generally grown with the firm and understands the firm culture," Yolevski says. Successful lawyer-managers must also be able to earn the respect of peers and develop a strong understanding of the legal market, competitors and future goals, says lawyer Carrie Heller, president of The Heller Group, which specializes in legal recruitment.

"Firms are not generally hiring lawyers from outside the firm as managers, but promoting lawyers already working within the firm as they have a good understanding of...the personalities that exist in the firm, the challenges the firm faces and the best way to grow strategically," Heller notes. "Although a traditional business professional may have more experience running a business, they will not bring to the table the same knowledge of the firm as a partner working within the firm." Few law firm leaders are selected to enact radical changes, McReynolds notes. Rather, most are chosen because they "fit" the firm and are believed to have the necessary leadership and communication skills to move the business forward.

Preparation may include serving on a management committee or obtaining some basic management training, but it is easy to underestimate the larger change that such a role entails, McReynolds points out.

"You take on a human-resources role that practitioners don't have to face," he says. "You are always on duty, never off. That can take some getting used to. Rewards are not immediate or tangible."

Lawyers who rise through the ranks to become management may also wind up in an uncomfortable "us vs. them" situation, Yolevski says, where relationships with close colleagues become strained. Another common concern is divided focus: the lawyer-manager risks neglecting case

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A cost-effective way to build firm's website



Luigi Benetton
Hi-Tech

WordPress, widely known as a blogging platform, is also the engine behind many law firm websites. Should you use WordPress to build your firm's site?

WordPress is a content management system (CMS) that keeps design separate from content. This separation makes it easier to add content to a web site. People can simply paste text into a browser window and click Publish.

Whenever somebody visits a page, WordPress finds the relevant content in its database, and then applies design to the content according to the *theme* (a package of design and features) of the site to build the page.

Jennifer Johannesen, a Toronto-based WordPress developer with more than 220 sites under her belt (including that of this article's author), notes that lawyers prioritize navigation so that visitors can "drill down" to specific areas of a site. That's where the nature of WordPress shines. "WordPress is already a database," she explains, "so people can search by name, specialty, practice area — they can get to what they want to find."



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Members of the vast WordPress developer community create both themes and plug-ins, which you can think of as "apps" that provide extra features to a site that WordPress doesn't offer out of the box.

The WordPress software is free, as are many themes and plug-ins. "WordPress is a good choice if you're on a limited budget and need to bootstrap your website," says Steve Matthews, president and founder of Stem Legal Web Enterprises. "Unless you're very tech-savvy, I think WordPress is the easiest of the major CMS products to get into production."

"Just keep in mind that DIY without any coding experience is very time intensive," Matthews adds. "There's going to be a learning curve."

While several people at Deeth Williams Wall can access the firm's site, associate James Kosa says they use an outside firm to manage it. "It's not difficult, but it's time-consuming to update," he says, noting that

the firm typically spends several hundred dollars each month for website maintenance.

The firm website supports cash flow, not the other way around, so Matthews recommends firms publish their sites quickly. "Give yourself permission to launch a 'Version One' website. Nothing online is permanent, including this site," he says. "The faster you finish tinkering, the sooner you focus on the deliverables that are your business."

"Know when your startup period is over," Matthews says. "Then upgrade the site. New businesses are forgiven for bootstrapping; established businesses look cheap, and turn away work without knowing it."

If you choose to bootstrap your own site, beware the difference between WordPress.org and WordPress.com. If you build your site on WordPress.com, the address will read (LawFirmName).wordpress.com. From a branding perspective, you need to omit the "wordpress" part of the address.

Dot-org offers a downloadable product **Content management, Page 22**

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files while bogged down with new management duties.

"[They must decide] whether to transition to other junior lawyers, scale back, or just carry on with a very full plate," Yolevski says.

Among the other tasks law-firm managers must approach with fresh eyes is hiring new staff for "fit and retention," rather than simply seeking lawyers in their own image, Lerek says. Their finely honed legal thinking, organizing and problem-solving skills — which come in so handy on client files — should be reapplied to "the team file," she says.

"You've got to learn a new word called coaching," Lerek says. "You've got to deal with problem performers; you've got to deal with high performers who may not want to join in; you've got to learn the term skilful feedback... You've got to motivate others, not just boost yourself up."

Organizational politics — such as learning how to form strategic alliances and gain information about external partnership opportunities — are also an important piece of the puzzle, Lerek says.

Promoting a lawyer rather than hiring an outside manager does not come without risks. Among those are possible missed

opportunities, Heller says, as outsiders can bring fresh ideas and a more objective analysis of the firm's operations and its lawyers. That can be particularly useful when confronted with the shifting demands of a 21st-century marketplace.

"I think management today has to think more globally and how their firm can develop strategically in a global environment," Heller says. "Today, you also need to deal with lateral moves, at all levels, on a fairly regular basis... [This] was not the case 15 years ago. There is also less loyalty with clients and management needs to focus on client retention and constantly winning new clients."

Ultimately, the best model for a successful law-firm manager includes both business savvy and legal experience, Lerek says. A management specialist who does not understand the legal mind is as likely to struggle as a lawyer who cannot see past his or her own caseload to grasp the nuances of building an effective team.

"They need both the lawyer's knowledge of the firm, but also they need the managing skills. It's A and B," Lerek says. "But if you've got it, it's dynamite."

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