

Travelling by train or by boat?

Law firms will have to satisfy younger lawyers' hunger for career choices if they are to retain their talents, writes **Nick Greenhalgh**

Over the next 10 years, law firms will face a major challenge in dealing with the mass of generation X lawyers reaching that stage of their careers where they may need to decide it's 'partnership or bust'.

When it comes to their careers, generation Xers aren't backward about demanding choice and instant gratification. This can be jarring for a profession with a very traditional career path that's relied mainly on time and talent – if you have the talent and serve the time, you end up with the career rewards of partnership.

In law, much as in medicine, the traditional career path has always been fairly long and predictable – like a railway track. However, lawyers coming through the ranks are now demanding choice and the opportunity to exercise these career options sooner. If law firms are to retain talent, they'll have to satisfy these demands for career choices.

Nowadays, many would prefer to see their career path not as a straight railway track but as a jetty with lots of boats leaving – it's up to the individual which 'boat' they jump on for a short journey before returning to the jetty and selecting a new one.

The latest figures from the US (Department of Labor Statistics 2003) show the typical 35-year-old white collar worker will have seven job changes and three career transitions in the next 20 years of their professional life. Some law firms have really acknowledged this, while others are locked into the traditional career path.

In our discussions with lawyers, these seem to be the major career issues:

- the perennial issue of work-life balance – within law, there's the expectation of working long hours
- there's a perceived lack of 'soft skills' within law-firm management (the types of skills to nurture staff's self-development – for example, clear listening, delivering effective feedback to staff and self-awareness)
- there's a disparity between the values important to the individual and the needs of the firm – for example, a young lawyer's ideals of providing justice versus the requirement to bill the client for every six minutes
- often there's limited opportunity to have open and frank career discussions with the senior partners (who frequently attach little importance to career management).

This last issue is an important one. Too many senior partners are unwilling to move to new career-path models because "that's not what happened in my day".

This leaves a lawyer (particularly mid-career) with several key questions: What's in it for me? Am I seeking status and income or job satisfaction and fulfilment? Do I stay in law or go – what are my options? Am I getting energy from this profession any more?



Nick Greenhalgh

In our work with lawyers and their firms, we take lawyers through a career audit that identifies several key areas, including the individual's unique value set. Frequently, when people are unhappy at work it is because there's a significant number of their values not being met (these values, for example, may cover personal development, recognition or teamwork).

It's important that there be an alignment of values between the law firm and the individual. This frequently results in the lawyer having a greater sense of purpose and re-engagement with the profession and the organisation.

Law firms need to have more effective discussions with their people about their careers. This involves working with senior partners to develop their ability and confidence to sit down and have meaningful discussions with their staff. In several cases, senior partners have expressed their desire to demonstrate career-coaching skills but fear they lack the confidence to implement this.

Too often when a lawyer is dissatisfied, they believe their only option is to change jobs. In most career cases, there are 10 perfectly good options and only option 10 is to leave the firm, with nine other legitimate options they could consider first. Other options may include secondment to an area or organisation of interest, special projects or even downshifting.

To illustrate this, a colleague recently received an email from a gen X lawyer who had left her straitlaced law firm to travel. Settling in London, she spurned the traditional law firms and ended up using her law skills for a government department in the area of child protection.

She emailed: "I would really think twice about going back to private practice ... I get more appreciated and feel more valued in one day in this job than I did in the entire two years at 'that other place'. My job is something I'm qualified for, get paid well for and it makes me feel important and worthwhile – I actually like going in every day!"

Already in Australia, the more innovative law firms are working hard to ensure their generation X lawyers are able to have their values and their need for new opportunities met within the confines of the firm rather than outside it. ■

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