

The Fine Print

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Developing law firm leadership both an art and science

By Stephen E. Seckler

The legal profession is in the midst of great change. Whether you believe the movement away from lock-step compensation and strict hourly billing will be rapid and dramatic or simply evolutionary, one thing is clear: Law firms that do not adapt to these changes will find it difficult to remain competitive.

Given the conservative nature of the practice of law, this represents some significant challenges. To meet these challenges head on, law firms must be proactive in thinking about how to train attorneys and develop the right kind of leadership.

That is the overriding theme of a new publication entitled "The Art and Science of Strategic Talent Management in Law Firms."

The book is a great reference tool for professionals who are involved in any stage of managing attorney talent, from recruiting through partnership and separation. While the volume speaks to firms of all sizes (in fact, there really is something for everyone in this volume), law firms that are large enough to have a pool of talent at all career stages will probably find the book most useful.

To assemble the volume, the publisher pulled together 14 authors who see the world from diverse vantage points. There are chapters written by chief professional development officers, independent career consultants and leadership consultants as well as a law school administrator and the director of legal recruiting at a multi-national firm.

Nonetheless, the book has a sense of cohesion that surprised me. Clearly the editor, Terri Mottershead, has done her homework in trying to weave consistent themes from cover to cover.

Mottershead begins the discussion by describing the evolution of talent management in law firms as they have grown in size and complexity. She talks about how firms have continued to add administrative staff to handle the recruiting and training functions and

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The Art and Science of Strategic Talent Management in Law Firms



TERRI MOTTERSHEAD
General Editor

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how those positions have moved more recently from operational jobs to those of greater strategic importance.

She suggests, however, that the change is happening at a much faster pace right now, and many law firms are not prepared because they have not yet linked their law firm strategic performance goals with strategic talent management.

Some of the forces described in the publication include the rise in ready access to free knowledge (i.e., that clients do not need

lawyers to answer every legal question in a Google world); the rise in sophistication of in-house counsel who are more aware now of their options in meeting their legal needs; the downward pressure on price; and the movement toward the bundling of legal services, caused in part by the adoption of the American Corporate Counsel's Value Challenge in 2009.

Many of the chapters discuss the use of "competency models" for recruiting, evaluating and promoting talent within a law firm. In using competency models, law firms invest time

and energy identifying the "behaviors, traits, and skills that support success" in the firm.

Under such a system, associates are no longer promoted year after year simply because of their tenure; rather they are elevated based on their ability to function at a certain level. Those competencies are defined by the qualities of the most successful lawyers in the firm, and at each career stage lawyers must meet demonstrate certain competencies in order to advance.

In addition to chapters on legal recruiting, competency-based development programs, competency-based performance management and even alternative models for law firm careers, there is an excellent chapter on how internal and external coaching can complement both traditional training and formal mentoring programs.

There are chapters on how pro bono can support talent management, the importance of diversity, and why the development of partners is an essential part of the discussion. There are also chapters on the role technology can play in helping law firms meet all these challenges. In short, it is all here in one volume.

"The Art and Science of Strategic Talent Management in Law Firms"

Terri Mottershead,
general editor

Thomson Reuters, 2010

389 pages; \$49

My main criticism of the book is that in trying to be comprehensive (which it does very well) it sacrifices a little in usability. In a future version of the publication, I would prefer to see more anecdotes about what is working well and perhaps examples of where firms are falling short.

Obviously, the authors are not going to go on record with negative information about a firm by name, but I believe the book would be much more readable if it contained longer case studies and fewer citations.

But for anyone who is involved in recruiting, managing or evaluating attorney talent in the law firm of today, this is a book that should be on your shelf. You may not read it from cover to cover, but you will certainly want to refer to it in addressing specific aspects of talent management in your firm.