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CAREER CONSULT

Lawyers See Benefit In Professional Coaching

By [Stephen E. Seckler](#)

Individualism is deeply ingrained in the culture of the United States. We live in a country where anyone can make it if they work hard enough.

But lurking behind this mythology lies a stark reality: In today's economy, no one truly makes it on their own. Leading politicians, professional athletes and top-grossing musicians are surrounded by advisors who have been critical to their success.

Well-run corporations realize this. They know that talented managers are more likely to achieve peak performance if they have mentors.

In fact, according to the Wall Street Journal, there is an increasing trend in top corporations towards hiring external coaches to work with senior level executives.

These executive coaches act as a sounding board and a reality check. They provide support, validation and resources and hold the executive accountable to his or her stated goals.

Professional coaching is spreading to the legal profession as well. A quick search of the Web will identify numerous consultants who offer coaching services to attorneys.

[What Is Coaching?](#)

Coaching is for individuals who want to raise their performance, increase their personal and

professional happiness, and acquire missing skills that are necessary for success.

Attorneys can use a coach to work on any mix of professional and personal issues. Some attorneys choose to work on business development while others are looking for ways to achieve better work/life balance. Some want to become better managers while others seek coaching because they need help leaving the practice of law or finding a more fulfilling position within the law.

The theory behind coaching is simple. An individual might hire a personal trainer to help him develop and follow a fitness plan. A professional hires a coach to help clarify professional and personal goals and create an action plan for reaching these goals. Along the way, the coach provides support and serves as a resource to the professional.

The coach also helps the individual move past roadblocks so the individual can achieve the right balance in his or her life and make appropriate changes necessary to achieve this balance.

Why Attorney Coaching?

Attorneys are good subjects for coaching because they are results-oriented professionals. But like most busy professionals, it is hard for attorneys to consistently focus on things that are important, but not urgent.

In addition, while attorneys may get good training in lawyering in the early years of practice, they are less likely to get career guidance or guidance in developing a book of business.

Coaching picks up where traditional consulting leaves off. In a typical consulting relationship, a consultant will identify ways that you can achieve your desired objective. The end product is often a report detailing the steps that are necessary to achieve the desired outcome (e.g. more business). Sometimes a consultant will actually do the work for you.

If the consultant is simply identifying the necessary steps for you to achieve your desired objectives, this by itself is usually inadequate to get the desired results.

For example, suppose business generation is the objective. The consultant may suggest writing several articles a year, getting active in an industry group, starting a mailing list, developing relationships with the media, etc. The coach makes sure that over time, these things actually get done.

How Does Coaching Work?

The sports analogy is probably the easiest one to follow. Imagine that a coach observed a promising high school basketball player and came up with a list of recommendations for how the player could improve his game. If the coach left the player alone for two years to implement the changes on his own, no one would expect this player to get to the NBA.

Similarly, the key to success in business development or in a career change is sustained effort. A professional coach sticks with the attorney after the steps are identified and ensures that "it" (whatever "it" is) gets done.

It boils down to this: Many of us know what we need to do to lose weight, get in shape or make business connections. But are we going to do these things without any external pressure or is work going to always be the priority?

In truth, it is hard to explain in words what coaching is, because in practice there are a wide range of coaching models and styles. But there are some generalizations that can be made.

Executive coaches often charge a monthly fee and schedule weekly phone conferences with their clients. Fees can range from a few hundred dollars up to several thousand dollars for very senior level managers.

At the start of the coaching process, many coaches will ask their clients to complete a number of exercises designed to help identify priorities. It is also typical for the coach and executive to meet in person at the beginning to help establish rapport.

Who Are Coaches?

At present, coaching is a relatively unregulated profession. Professionals come to coaching with a wide range of backgrounds. Attorneys often work with experienced members of the profession who have been through their own process and want to share what they have learned.

Coaches may also have a background in psychology or career counseling, and some may have been through a certification program offered by CoachU (see www.coachu.com for more information).

The bottom line is to find someone you feel you can work with and trust. Usually, this will mean finding someone who has been referred to you by someone else you trust.

Conclusion

A law degree can still open up a lot of doors for you, but real career satisfaction takes both hard work and planning. Having the degree and working in a good law firm are not enough.

Many of us do not take the time to reflect on what we really want. Some of us do not know what steps to follow to get what we want. Still others know the steps but cannot figure out how to rearrange their professional and personal lives to make room for these important but not urgent activities.

A coach can be the key ingredient in making things happen.

Stephen Seckler is president of Seckler Legal Coaching. Previously, he was managing director of the Boston office of BCG Attorney Search, a national recruiting firm. He writes the blog www.counselltocounsel.com, which was included in the American Bar Association Journal's Blawg100 in 2007 and 2008. He can be contacted at legal@seckler.com.
