

Growing fee earners into marketers

UK law firms have a wealth of largely untapped marketing resources in their assistant pool.

The barriers to exploiting this in law firms is that these firms run to a finely honed model with assistants being measured primarily through billing hours achieved against target. They and other qualified lawyers in the firm are the engine room of productivity- after all, in many firms they outnumber the partners 4:1.

Most assistants, unlike partners, do not have a business development element built into their time recording targets. This give rise to the dilemma of how do they develop their business development and marketing skills.

These skills can be taught, but experience is key to enhancing these analysis, networking and pitching skills. The difficulty for good lawyers on the partnership track is how to find the time for this element of their development.

Newly made up partners therefore find themselves with additional management responsibilities for which they are ill-equipped.

Law firms are not blind to this issue, they recognise that the best partners are not simply those who were the best senior assistants. Their response, however, does not necessarily adequately address the needs of both parties.

Aspiring assistants at firms without a structured approach to developing these skills can find themselves having to squeeze in (on top of an already heavy workload) business development activities where they can - often after normal business hours and with little thought given to objectives, strategy and tactics, i.e. whether what they are doing fits into an overall campaign of activity designed to influence one or more key target audiences.

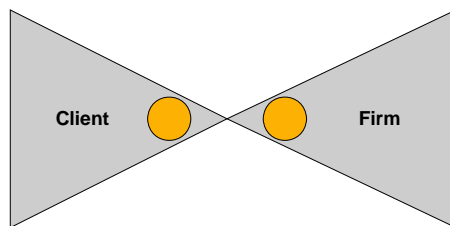
Different firms have attempted to address this in different ways, with varying degrees of success.

Assistants are often cajoled into attending client hospitality events, drafted in to manning stands at conferences or having walk-on parts in pitches. More enlightened firms include assistants in client development plans and as part of campaign teams addressing a particular issue or market.

The dilemma for partners of law firms is knowing how much investment to make in assistants time to enhance these skills against the requirement to maintain the “engine room” of the firm at full throttle.

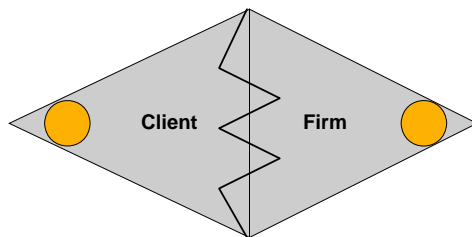
The goal

Existing relationships: Our firm, like others, recognises that effective BD skills at a more junior level enhance our relationships with key clients. A desire for most firms is to move from the traditional 'bow-tie' model of client relationships with the relationship held by just one party from each side to a deeper, more stable relationship with effective relationships held at all levels- the 'diamond' model.



Bow tie

- Relationship with one partner
- Strong, close relationship with few key people
- Vulnerable and limited growth



Diamond

- Multiple, strong relationships
- More efficient
- A relationship that can grow

New relationships: our firm recognises that today's junior executives in client firms are the leaders of tomorrow and that nurturing the skills of their assistants to equip them to develop their relationships will pay dividends over time.

These goals are both fine in theory, but do they match up to reality? The failure to adequately prepare assistants for a life as a fee generating partner is often largely down to the owners and managers of a law firm, the partners, with appropriate training and exposure to client situations for assistants both consciously and unconsciously regulated.

The economics of firms requires that assistants meet their chargeable hours, with the remaining hours largely filled with legal skills training. In an effort to understand any gaps between partner and assistant perception and expectation, we undertook a mini survey of both partners and assistants within our firm.

The problem

To understand this issue a little better our survey of partners and senior assistants at our firm asked assistants how much involvement they have and would like in a range

of business development activities. We also asked partners what they believed assistants were involved in and what they considered they should be more involved in.

There were some interesting outcomes:

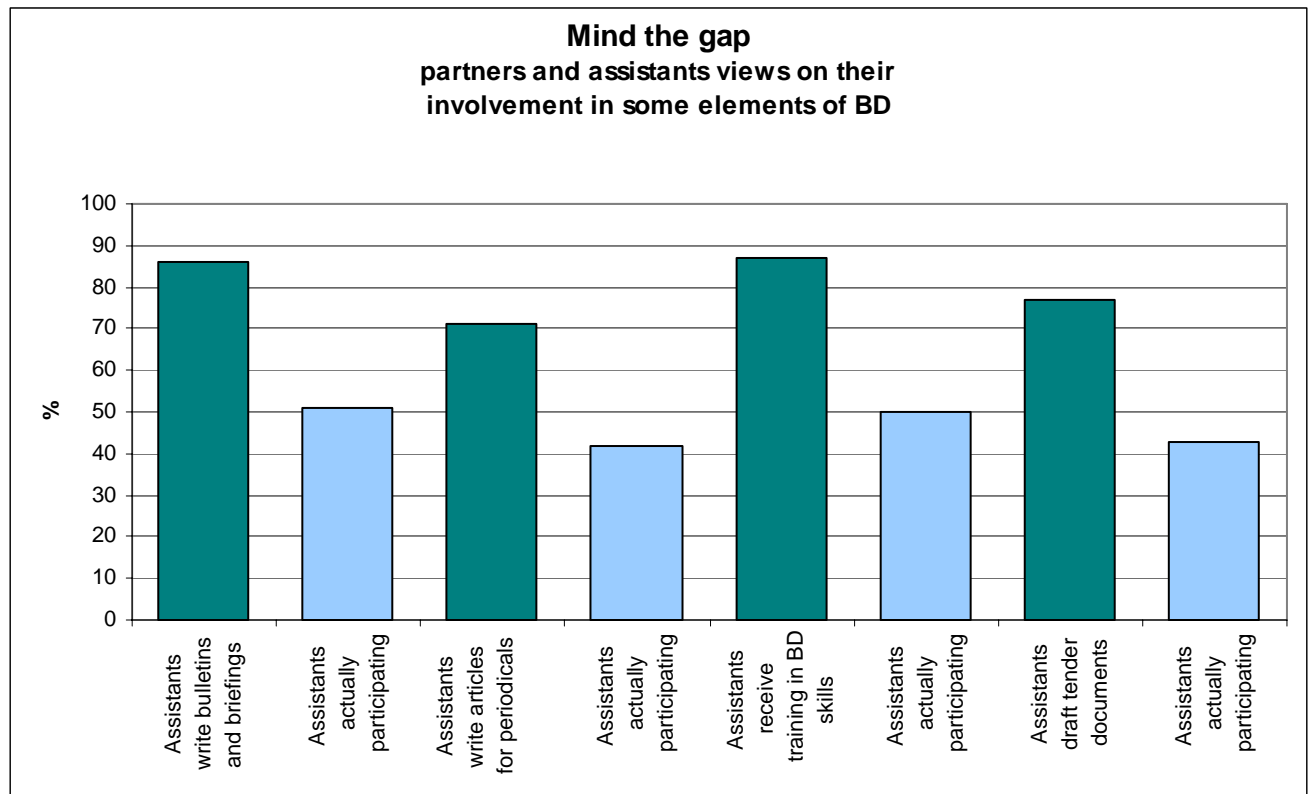
All assistants record their non-chargeable time spent on business development/marketing activities, when we looked at these figures in more depth we found some widely varying results, from as little as 1.5 hours to well over 100 hours in a quarter- the variance seemed to depend on what department you were in and the attitude of the supervising partner.

Most senior assistants have a degree of involvement and would like more. A relatively small percentage claimed to be involved in all categories of business development, though a similar percentage claimed to be involved in none at all.

Not surprisingly, the activities where assistants considered they were least active were presenting at conferences and writing articles for periodicals, both of which it could be argued require considerable experience and training. Perhaps more interesting was the finding that assistants felt that they were not so involved in PR and drafting tender documents, both activities that one could consider ideal 'fodder' for the budding assistant. None of the assistants questioned were involved in 'grass roots' business development planning

There was a positive match between the views of partners and assistants around being involved in client events and seminars. The survey indicated that assistants were most enthusiastic about activities involving direct client contact, particularly client events and seminars, and partners appear to support this view.

There were, however, areas where the views of partners didn't quite fit those of assistants. Their general view was that the proper place for assistants was to be involved in writing articles and bulletins and client contact to be restricted to social events. Assistants are thought of as being less likely to be involved in presenting to clients.



* the partners view includes assistants 'occasionally or extensively involved' in the activity

While this survey was not wholly representative or comprehensive, it illustrates that there are clearly some mismatches of perception around what partners thought assistants are involved in and what they actually are involved in. On one hand we have a population of assistants who are very keen to get to partnership and want appropriate experience and training to enable them to do so, and on the other hand a group of partners who believe they are already getting the right sort of exposure.

So what have we done about it?

It is true that early on in a solicitor's career developing technical skills takes a high priority and this is certainly reflected in the sort of training our junior lawyers actively look for. Recognising the issues illustrated in our short survey, our approach has been to provide both practical and developmental opportunities for our assistants to grow this set of skills that will be essential throughout their careers- and critical if they want to achieve partnership where the pressure is really on to manage existing relationships and create new ones. And this is not just about the firm wanting to support our junior lawyers, the feedback we receive from clients in our relationship review process has also flagged that clients want lawyers with good personal skills and an interest and ability in learning about their requirements.

Probably the most important starting point for us was recognising that some people find it incredibly tough and none of that has anything to do with how good you are at the law. Managing, developing and growing relationships is not something you really learn about in law school and understandably lots of business development situations one might find yourself in, like networking events say, are consequently uncomfortable unless you are something of a natural.

Improving our lawyers' comfort and ability in networking situation is a very good example of how we see more junior members of the firm contribute to business development. What seems to work for us are having plentiful and regular opportunities to get out there and have a go, as well as more formal sessions, little and often, to learn about and practice these skills.

This all starts with our trainees who have their own networking forum (that they developed and run themselves, but is funded by the firm) that encourages them to begin networking with their peers, also starting out on their own careers. We will see junior accountants and surveyors, project managers and local government officers, in-house lawyers and entrepreneurs at these events: and one day these might well be the CEO's or business owners or heads of legal who can instruct us.

And it doesn't stop there, networking groups have been set up at all levels within the firm. Once qualified our solicitors are encouraged to get along to and participate in the seminars and events that our partners and marketing team are constantly arranging as part of our business development plans.

We have coupled this with a number of short training sessions (happening throughout the year) that have focused on practical application and real life situations. These have been delivered by external consultants who have the credibility and experience to reassure our lawyers that they are not alone in finding these situations tough, and that there are really some simple tricks and techniques they can use to both build their confidence and improve their skills. These are employed to real effect when assistants join clients on a limited secondment, here they get to put into practice these soft skills in a real life situation.

So the conclusion is that there is really not just one thing that works: getting the message out there that fostering relationships are as much a part of a lawyer's role as the black letter law; providing lots of opportunities to actually do it; and ensuring that you recognise that it might be difficult and support people appropriately.

We recognise that they need help to do this, our role as the business development team is to get our message across early in their career and provide small bites at the theory mixed with continuous training throughout their early career.

Our top tips for growing marketers:

- Allow assistants to network with their peers in client companies in a formal way (this includes funding!)
- Provide training on the theory of professional services marketing in small bites throughout an assistants early career (it won't all make sense at first)
- Support this with regular doses of practical soft skills training
- Involve your assistants in your activities and allow them the time to do it
- Recognise good practice in team meetings