

Professional Development as Competitive Edge During the Great Resignation

My colleague Terry Isner recently wrote about our experience at the [Pitch Perfect session](#) during the annual Driving Diversity and Leadership Conference of the National Association of Minority and Women Owned Law Firms (NAMWOLF) in San Antonio. During the session, a select group of firms conducted presentations to a panel of in-house counsel and received critiques on everything from slide decks to who at the firm presented the pitch and why to the firm's brand.

Terry and I both learned a lot and appreciated being flies on the wall. I found it fascinating that not one question from the in-house counsel panel had to do with the firm's legal ability, knowledge, experience or even price. Instead, their questions were about people and culture. Specifically, panelists wanted to know how these firms were providing professional development opportunities for their attorneys.

From a recruitment perspective, providing professional development opportunities and programs will be a key differentiator in today's legal employment market, especially considering the challenges presented by [the Great Resignation](#) and the current associate shortage.

While law firms often use salaries as a cure-all for an associate shortage, the younger incoming generation of attorneys cares more about factors such as billable hours, proper mentoring and a promising future that's outlined through a transparent path to partnership. A firm must provide professional development offerings that align with these expectations.

Different firms approach professional development in completely different ways, and even define it in different ways. Some firms define professional development as marketing training and coaching. For others, it could be mentoring programs. Whatever it is, professional development has to be defined well and then shouted from the rooftops because again, a firm's professional development program could very well be the deciding factor in whether your next target recruit comes on board or chooses a different opportunity.

Here is a list of leading opportunities that law firms could offer their attorneys in the way of professional development.

Marketing, BD and training

This one is first on my list. Attorneys have told me they accepted employment offers primarily because firms provided marketing and business development training and support. Too often, I see law firm management placing mandatory client acquisition goals



Glennie J. Green
Senior Vice President
Marketing & Business
Development
817.266.2320
ggreen@jaffepr.com

on an attorney's plate while failing to provide the helpful resources and training an attorney needs to [develop relationships and new business](#). Many new law school graduates learn for the first time they are expected to actively develop new clients after they've been hired by a law firm, not during law school.

Training in marketing and business development has many facets — anything from [how to build out a robust LinkedIn profile](#) to learning how to prospect effectively for new relationships to [networking etiquette](#). A law firm should either find or create a well-rounded program with a major component of spending quality time learning each attorney's marketing and business development goals, personality and communication style. Then, identify opportunities that align with these elements to ensure success.

Client experience and satisfaction

Did you know that client experience is the number-one brand differentiator? A law firm on a mission to provide superior client experience and satisfaction is most likely to have professional development training on those same initiatives. Client satisfaction produces solid relationships, loyalty and retention, which improve an attorney's bottom line. The stronger the relationship an attorney has with their clients, the more rewarding and profitable the relationship will be, so training in providing superior client experience and satisfaction is an extremely valuable investment of time and resources. A law firm and its attorneys should have a deep understanding of their clients' customer service experience and satisfaction because these could be your competitive differentiator — for clients and recruits.

Don't confuse — client service — with — client experience, — by the way. For example, just because attorneys do good work doesn't mean that they're providing a superior client experience. It also doesn't guarantee that their clients are loyal to them. A client's level of loyalty with an attorney directly relates to the level of the relationship (experience) with that client.

I'm not saying that doing good work isn't part of the equation — it is, but that's the — service — part. You also have to focus on the total experience from your client's perspective — your responsiveness, accessibility, and how well and often you interact with your client. How often are you checking in with them outside of the work you do for them? Do you have a consistent touchpoint or cadence system with your clients? There are so many things to think about that factor into how your firm delivers its client experience and satisfaction program and go beyond doing good work.

Organizational development in the legal industry

Organizational development training is the process of transferring knowledge within an organization to prepare employees for current or future jobs and responsibilities. This could be training to become a partner, a practice group lead or a member of the C-suite. I've worked with a law firm where each non-equity partner led each of the main operational duties for one year as they worked their way to becoming an equity partner. By the time they achieved equity, they had been the marketing partner, accounting partner, facilities partner, etc. I've seen several law firms support their legal assistants

or paralegals through law school to provide a smooth transition as a new lawyer after graduation. These training programs provide transparency about career elevation within the firm and give attorneys clear goals to work toward.

Mentoring programs

A successful mentor program focuses on the success of the mentee, but it should be just as rewarding for the mentor. That's why a firm's mentoring program should also focus on training the mentors. It should also be selective about *who* is a mentor. Don't assign a 65-year-old litigator to a first-year associate who wants to build a transactional practice. Check for and understand generational differences, which shouldn't prevent a successful mentor/mentee experience, but rather provide opportunities for reciprocal learning. Both the mentor and mentee should understand their roles, and the mentor should be honest about their experience as a mentor as well. Meetings should be regular, supportive and productive, and commitments should be kept. The mentor should be a trusted advisor who upholds confidentiality. Set an end goal for the relationship — one that is measurable and benefits both the mentor and mentee.

Soft skills training

Management often assumes that by the time attorneys begin their careers, they inherently or instinctively have the soft skills needed for success. We know how important it is to have excellent communication skills, but *how* attorneys use those skills is just as important. Attorneys should possess empathy, integrity, humility, persistence and the ability to listen. In fact, 80% of success in business is determined by soft skills. This brings us full circle back to client experience, because soft skills bring clients to the firm.

You've heard clients say, "I hire attorneys, not law firms." Your client is most likely purchasing (hiring) from an emotional motivation that is completely drawn in by effective soft skills. A professional development program in soft skills training should include courses and discussions about improving all forms of communication, developing strong emotional intelligence, having a sense of humor, being adaptable yet assertive, developing leadership and negotiation skills, and understanding how to truly work collaboratively and — most importantly — be empathetic.

Law firms interested in recruiting strong talent should establish some form of a professional development program that integrates a mix of these elements. A law firm should identify its priorities and develop a program that supports those priorities. The program should become part of the firm's culture. In the current competitive climate, your firm's professional development opportunities may just be the reason a new client or attorney comes to your firm.

For help with your business development programs, contact Glennie Green at ggreen@jaffepr.com.