

An Obvious Solution to Many Challenges Within the Legal Industry – The Sabbatical??

By [Michael D. Short](#) on April 19, 2018

As suggested by the question marks in the title, this following post is intended to be a thought-piece...not a recommendation for the entire legal industry.

Most law firms I know do not offer sabbaticals as a benefit to long-tenured lawyers. The few that do regularly wrestle with the staging of lawyers on leave; the impact of the lost production from these hard-workers on the firm's current year economics; and/or whether the program's cost in time, money, and stress is worth continuing.

Beyond the mental health and well-being of the partner on leave, which are significant benefits in and of themselves, it's easy to link the benefits derived from these programs – either directly or tangentially – with several serious challenges facing many law firms right now.

Consider the baseline requirements of a successful sabbatical program – if a Relationship Partner is going to take an extended leave, the relationship must be in good hands long before the leave, which requires others who a) know the client, b) are accepted by the client, c) understand past issues faced by the client, and d) can handle future issues.

This situation lays the foundation for transitioning and institutionalizing the relationship which, by itself, is a great outcome. If lost, the cost of acquiring a new "replacement" client is *multiples* of the cost of retaining the original client, as I am told by our business development consultants/coaches.

Now let's look at this situation more broadly – if sabbaticals occur regularly and the spirit of teamwork required to maintain one relationship through a sabbatical extends, culturally, throughout the firm then other tangible benefits will follow, including –

- Expanding each client relationship – clients favor firms they already know and trust for additional services so the odds of cross-selling to existing clients are *multiples* of the odds of landing a new client;
- Institutionalizing the relationship – the risk of client departures declines dramatically when the client uses/sees multiple types of services AND when several Partners are involved in a relationship the odds of a client departure are very small;
- Generating more profits – any increase in client retention generates much higher profits than the profits from new clients due to all of the costs (time and money) required to land the new client.

Benefits from a good sabbatical program don't stop here. Teams built to retain client relationships through a sabbatical also produce –

- Future client relationship Partners – many young Partners feel trapped behind more senior Partners who do not provide Partner development opportunities. With a sabbatical program these Partners *must* be given development opportunities for the program to be successful;

- More structured training and development for younger lawyers – when a young Partner moves up within a client relationship team – even for a short period of time – everyone else must move up as well;
- A broader business/industry knowledge base – when all lawyers move up within a client relationship, all develop a higher level understanding of the issues/challenges faced by the related industry that can be used to attract similarly situated clients (where appropriate); and
- An early look at potential future relationship, practice, office, and firm leaders – much can be learned by watching how young Partners react to the opportunities presented by a sabbatical.

Finally, as law firms position themselves to attract future generations of lawyers, I think a sabbatical program will be viewed as a very attractive benefit by the young lawyers to come.

So, from this simple program comes re-energized senior lawyers, trained and more developed juniors, future leaders, institutional teamwork, satisfied clients who use the firm for multiple services so they are far less likely to go elsewhere, more profits, industry knowledge to build even more business on, and an attractive benefit for recruiting. The relative cost of paying a Partner to recharge and not work seems to pale in comparison. With so much upside that comes at a modest cost, I simply can't figure out why so few firms offer sabbaticals.