

How to Avoid Random Acts of Training in Small & Mid-Size Law Firms: Lessons From Big Law Professional Development

By [LawVision](#) on August 5, 2014

It's old news: Clients don't want to pay to train junior associates. With increasing pressure on realization rates and a heightened focus on efficiency, many small and mid-size firms are left wondering how to cultivate a talent pool that helps them achieve a competitive advantage.

While large firms have entire professional development teams dedicated to developing the practical and professional skills of their associates, the ultimate responsibility for training at small and mid-size firms often falls on the shoulders of overworked managing partners or executive directors. Understandably, it's not uncommon for associates to report that "random acts of training" tend to be the norm for professional development at these firms. In the short term this training gap impacts efficiency, realization and profitability. In the long term it influences firm culture, leads to retention challenges and develops potential succession issues.

Where does that leave small and mid-size firms without the Big Law training arsenal at their disposal? Director of Firmwide Attorney Development at Kirkland & Ellis, Lisa Pilotto, recently shared with me her thoughts on the best way to train the junior talent at any size firm – engage senior talent in the process. According to Lisa:

"Passing down best practices is the only way to keep clients and senior partners happy with the work performed by junior attorneys. On the flip side, junior attorneys want to be successful at their current firms. There is no better way to do that than to emulate the excellent practices of those ahead of you."

I think Lisa raises a great point and I developed this concept into 5 ways small and mid-size firms with limited resources can make an immediate impact in talent development:

1) Involve Clients

- You already know the importance of developing an ongoing dialogue with clients about their current challenges and future needs. Take it one step further and ensure that you understand how your firm can narrowly tailor your talent development to your clients' business objectives. For example...
- Often overlooked by small and mid-size firms in the U.S., secondments offer a talent development trifecta: Clients fill specialized resource gaps, lawyers develop in-house training, and firms strengthen relationships.

2) Engage Associates

- Offering confidential forums for associates to communicate is an excellent first step for small and mid-size firms. Soliciting feedback via surveys, focus groups or one-on-one meetings can provide invaluable information about professional development, training and engagement issues.
- Manage the investment time of each associate with training in mind and invite them along for local trials, deal negotiation meetings or sitting in on conference calls.

3) Incentivize Partners

- Professional development efforts at small and mid-size firms rarely get off the ground without backing and support from key partners. Identifying partners in your firm who have the interest and capacity to champion a renewed emphasis on professional development is an essential step.
- Including involvement in professional development as a criterion for setting compensation is an excellent way to emphasize the importance of talent development and incentivize involvement.

4) Plan Strategically

- Strategic planning should never happen in a vacuum. Involving associates in the planning process – even in a limited capacity – can help develop future leaders and build rapport within the firm.
- Aligning professional development with the strategy helps develop the skills required to bolster a new industry group or expanding practice area.
- Involving associates in client teams can develop industry expertise and strengthen relationships by penetrating multiple levels of an organization.
- Many strategies today have a talent strategy as part of the overall implementation plan to address these points and myriad others needed to align talent with the plan.

5) Utilize Data

- You don't need to have an expansive Big Law team to dig into the numbers. Understanding your firm's retention statistics and how they compare to national averages is a basic step. Looking at historical billable hours data, write-offs, and realization rates to provide insight into areas for talent development including potential process improvement initiatives.

Although daunting and easily overlooked, investing in talent development at small and mid-size firms can pay huge dividends in creating a competitive advantage. You don't need to have Big Law resources to make a significant impact in professional development at your firm. Small steps can make a big difference.