

A Modest Proposal: Mentorship and Associate Development in Law Firms, Part I

Article By:

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In April 2012, a group of attorneys from the Meritas Leadership Institute (“Meritas”) discussed and identified recurring trends in the legal industry that affect law firms on a global scale. Among the trends was retention, with young attorneys leaving law firms before benefiting the firm by bringing in new clients or earning big wins. This relates to law firms applying considerable amount of time and resources in recruiting new talent who do not ultimately stay with the firm. In addition, a generational gap exists as the novice and seasoned practitioner work side by side, often with different perspectives on worth ethic, profession ambitions, communication styles, personal motivations, notions of professionalism and more. Is there a solution to all of these problems so as to drive efficiency and harmony in law firms? Meritas offers a modest proposal in its white paper entitled the [“2012-2013 Model Mentorship and Associate Development Program.”](#)

Trends in the Legal Industry Concerning Mentorship

The white paper takes the stance that the Model Mentorship and Associate Development Program (“Mentorship Program”) is considered key in solving all of the above issues because with proper instruction and individualized attention, new attorneys will “join the team.” In turn, these attorneys add value to their law firms and receive more personal satisfaction.

The white paper is the brainchild of young attorneys who have collaborated in Meritas and worked together to engage in thought leadership activities. Katie Lynch, a member of the cohort, worked with her colleagues for a year to produce the white paper, which develops the purpose, structure and goals of mentoring and associate development. She provides her insights into the project and research in this article.

As part of its methodology, Meritas conducted a survey of senior attorneys with twenty plus years in the legal industry and new attorneys with seven or less years of experiences. Meritas also interviewed attorneys from all over the world in order to obtain a global perspective of the legal industry. Their research showed across the board that firms with formal mentoring programs in place as well as young attorneys with mentors thrived as compared to their counterparts without mentorship programs and mentors, respectively. “The Mentoring Programs helped them get associated and accustomed [to the law firm], ” Ms. Lynch explained.

Indeed, this supports changes in the practice of law, with the advent of technology. With email and off-site remote access, attorneys are increasingly working more independently, resulting in less cultivation of their professional development. The ultimate purpose of this program is to facilitate face-to-face interaction between novice attorneys and seasoned practitioners in order to support the growth of the young associate at an earlier point in their careers.

New Attorneys Engaging in the Business of Law

It is a known fact that new attorneys coming out of law school are not taught the business of law. Yet a law firm is in the service industry. “It’s not just about what to put in a motion and other general practice issues,” Ms. Lynch said. The Mentorship Program places a greater emphasis on building a business of law skill set. Whereas before attorneys were handed cases, now they are expected to build their own book of business earlier in their careers, along with retaining clients, marketing, and other such functions. The Mentorship Program recognizes that new associates need to be educated in this area.

The other important component to the Mentorship Program is that associates start as soon as they join so that they can obtain support from day one. “Young attorneys with tools of success can bring law firms success,” Ms. Lynch said. In integrating into the law firm environment, they will develop their own practice and engage in business development, thereby affecting the bottom line of the law firm. From a general overview of the law firm to the day-to-day specifics, a formal mentoring program can acclimate attorneys and allow them to operate efficiently and blend into the law firm culture.

[Part II of this article will discuss specific components of the Mentorship Program and provide advice to law firms on how to adopt the program.](#)

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