

Tomorrow's lawyer



Chrissie Lightfoot argues that 2010 could be the dawn of the 'soft skills' age for the legal profession.

You can't deny that we've had a rough ride in the last 18 months. The legal profession has experienced an unprecedented downturn, partly due to the global recession. For the first time in legal history a crash has cut so deep that it has affected almost everyone in the profession, even those who are about to enter it.

Many firms have reduced hours, frozen salaries, reduced bonus pools, cut headcount, frozen recruitment, deferred entry for trainees, as well as drastically reduced training, marketing and business development spend - all in a bid to slash costs. Some lawyers may be on a four day week or working five but only getting paid for four. Others may even have re-trained to work in an area of law as a stop-gap with a hope to return to their chosen field. You may be reading this thinking 'this isn't what I signed up for'. So, what are you going to do about it, and how?

Perception and reality

The perception may be that we have come through the worst of the recession but the reality is that the decade ahead is going to present new economic challenges and significant changes to political, social and technological trends.

Jonathan Oxley, senior partner of Lee & Priestley LLP and chairman of the Yorkshire Shadow Monetary Policy Committee comments, "The global recession, serious as this is, is a distraction from the main challenge facing established law firms. The transformation of the way in which the world of legal business operates is now underway. Competition is intensifying and client expectations are evolving. Advisors need to evolve accordingly. What is required is a

Chrissie Lightfoot is an entrepreneur-turned- solicitor (non-practising)-turned entrepreneur, woman ambassador and CEO of EntrepreneurLawyer. She works with solicitors to help them get more sales through 'soft skilling'. Her Ebook on this subject will be available in February. www.EntrepreneurLawyer.co.uk.

step change in thinking and behaviour and a need to embrace new skills and strategies. The successful lawyers of the future will be the ones who embrace this challenge."

Russell Davidson, managing partner of Davidson Large LLP adds, "other professionals are surprised to discover we have clients from all over the UK, included a number of listed companies based in London. 'How come?' I get asked. I reply that 'being a good lawyer' isn't something you hear clients raise very often because they expect that anyway: it's such a fundamental part of the deal when they buy legal services that it's rarely mentioned. Yet too many lawyers focus on this, and so miss the 'soft' skills: for what differentiates law firms is whether prospective clients have the confidence you understand their business, that they feel you comprehend what they want to achieve, that you will be responsive to their needs (clients hate chasing solicitors!) and cost-effective and can cut through the legal stuff to give them a solution that works for them."

Some 800 years of history is due to come to an end when the reforms of the Legal Services Act 2007 come into full effect. Competition from client-centric major players, "DIY free legal documents providers" via the internet and virtual law firms will challenge our established engagement model, increase client confidence and levels of expectation and set high new standards in customer service.

So where does the profession stand in meeting this challenge? Mike Turner, Managing Director of Oakland Consulting Ltd, believes that there is much room for improvement. He bases this belief on the results of recent research into the client relationship management practices of 30 professional services firms, including a number of legal service providers.

He found that, whilst over 90 per cent accepted the crucial roles that customer service and relationship management plays in these people-based businesses, only 40 per cent reported they were effectively managing their relationship management processes. What was even more startling was that whilst 50 per cent reported to have a formal process for obtaining feedback on service delivery, less than half shared client relationship data across the business and only 40 per cent believed Customer Relationship Management to be a subject for Board-level concern.

"Without these key processes and data, it is impossible for a professional services business to deliver competitive levels of client care", argues Mike.

The industry faces a real wake-up call, a theory echoed by Stuart Brown, owner of Dare2Care: "Client satisfaction is the key to future profitability and growth for both individuals and the firms they serve. It's no longer the sole responsibility of the partners or business development team. It's about really listening to your clients and providing your entire team with skills and resources to optimise your clients' experience when working with your firm at every level."

"The recession has changed the client focus and it's now a buyer's market. In the main it's a given that we do all the 'technical stuff', so stop telling them quite as much and introduce a structured and consistent process to really listen. You'll find that your clients will tell you (and in some detail too), how you can 'touch' them and their lives in a way that will result in more fee income and more substantial lifetime value than you could ever imagine".

Digital reality

We live in a digital world where new media has embedded itself in mainstream life and the numbers of self-employed, micro businesses and entrepreneurs are increasing every year. Technological advances which have enabled the global phenomena of Google, Ebay, LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and i-phone apps have made it easy and cost-effective to trade, market, have more clients, build relationships and 'do business' more quickly. The potential client has information about you, the legal product/service and the firm globally at the press of a button via the internet and mobile devices.

Deirdre Bounds, a successful entrepreneur who sold i-to-i Travel for an 8 figure sum two years ago comments: "I expect commercially savvy legal advice which is value for money. Therefore, I instruct lawyers that show willing, make a real effort to be available, go the extra mile and are clued-in to new ways of working. I look to build a great long term working relationship. If I don't get this, I go elsewhere. I also admire mavericks - people who stick their neck out."

In this new era where supply is outstripping demand, your clients are now setting the agenda and becoming much more discerning about their choice of supplier at many levels. No longer is it merely about 'what' you do; but to them 'how' you engage with them... 'how' you communicate with them... and 'how' you add value to their relationship with you.

Nick Davies, senior tax consultant at Garbutt & Elliott, adds: "Better business requires better relationships all round, whether it is with clients, referrers or colleagues online and offline. We place great emphasis on 'giving' and building strong relationships with legal professionals in a bid to ensure our clients receive a top notch service."

If I can do it, you can too...

Throughout my final year as a trainee solicitor and since founding EntrepreneurLawyer (a period of a little over a year) I generated and referred £562,000 of new client legal work enquiries. This was achieved using a refreshing relationship building, relationship sales and relationship marketing approach (soft-skilling) which appealed to prospective clients and referrers. It involved mixing traditional and conventional marketing and sales methods, techniques and systems with new, unconventional and innovative techniques.

The future

The profession is unlikely to return to the halcyon days when clients simply walked through the door, value work and margins were plentiful, salaries and bonuses continually plump. The digital age and the 'enlightened consumer' are here to stay. Never before has the need been so great for lawyers and law firms to be armed with 'soft skills' in the pursuit of generating more new client leads and converting to sales, whilst leveraging more sales and referrals from existing clients and referrers.

So, how do you define 'soft skills'? Well, they are all that 'fluffy stuff' that isn't technical 'hard' law, such as client care, customer service, emotional intelligence, researching, marketing, selling, persuading, negotiating, wooing, relating, branding, networking, communicating, innovating, commercial savvy, leadership and management.

Be a lawyer of tomorrow, today

If you want a successful career, you need to dare to be different. You need to cull old, outmoded, restrictive structures, practices and ideas and embrace innovative thinking

and action. You need to become a lawyer of tomorrow, today.

You will need to be entrepreneurial, innovative, relationship-focused, client-focused, proactive, of a positive mindset and 'soft skilled up' to attract the clients of the past, present and future. Listen to what your clients, referrers and enlightened partners want and expect. The 'soft skills' that give you the ability to generate work, build and leverage solid relationships, market and 'soft sell' will stand you in good stead whatever the future holds and wherever you decide to take your career.

The Bottom Line

No matter what stage you are at in your legal career the dawning of this new decade will inevitably bring unprecedented challenges, the likes of which your professional services career has not previously witnessed, let alone equipped you to manage.

Providing quality legal advice requires continual learning – and soft skilling is no different. It can be learned. With ever-increasing availability and acceptance of the delivery of 'soft skill' coaching to the profession there is no excuse not to undertake this course of action. Your legal career may just depend on it.

Perhaps you need to ask yourself "how do I see my legal career progressing or law firm performing and developing?" and "where do I best invest my time, effort and money to achieve it?"

Take control of the direction of your legal career and get wooing!

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