

Managing

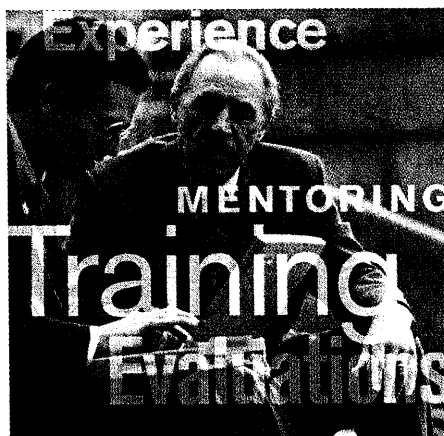
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Designing Your Firm's Professional Development Program

As any successful firm can tell you, an emphasis on the professional development needs of your lawyers is key to building and maintaining profitability. The lawyers are the firm's intellectual capital, and it is, after all, the product of the firm's intellectual capital that makes the firm unique as well as successful. That's why it's so important to be aware that all lawyers need professional development opportunities to stay current on and expand their substantive knowledge and skills. Whether your firm is made up of one lawyer or 1,000 lawyers, taking a proactive approach to creating a professional development program is one of the building blocks of success.

Make the Firm's Goals the Foundation of the Program

At the base of every professional development program are the firm's goals. These goals allow you to consider what the priorities will be for your program, as well as to focus on the priorities for



your firm as a whole. Take, for example, some of the goals of other firms:

"Our goal is to provide the best legal services to our clients."

"We want to be the 'go-to' firm for our areas of practice."

"We will provide our clients with excellent services while maintaining the highest of ethical standards."

If your firm has not formulated its goals, make it a priority to sit down with all partners to discuss and commit to specific objectives. What is the purpose of your firm? What makes it unique and distinct from other law firms? And where do you want to go from here? Having goals gives you the destination.

So, how will you get there? Identify the kinds of skills, substantive knowledge and professional behaviors

needed to meet the firm's stated goals. Once these are identified, you can design your professional development program.

Tie the Program's Core Components to the Big Picture

Directly connecting your professional development program with your firm's goals enables everyone to get committed to the program. They can understand its purpose and wholeheartedly endorse it, when they see that it adds value in ways that will contribute to the firm's overall success.

A good professional development program has three main components: experience, training and evaluations. If your firm is large enough, you should also include a mentoring component. Since the firm is probably doing something in one or more of these categories already, begin by taking a firmwide survey of what professional development activities are currently going on. In addition to letting you identify possible duplicate efforts, the survey will help you see what holes you need to fill with your program.

Now, let's take a closer look at the four components.

The Experience Component

The experience component consists of assigning work that allows your professionals to develop the skills, substantive knowledge and behaviors that your firm has deemed key in meeting its goals. Meaningful assignments go a



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long way toward giving lawyers the hands-on experience they need to develop.

Supervising lawyers and their associates can together identify specific work that will help each associate develop necessary proficiencies. A supervising lawyer who really thinks through the assignment process is rewarded with associates who are learning, being challenged and willing to take on greater responsibilities. As associates become more proficient, they contribute significantly to a firm's financial success.

The Training Component

Training can be accomplished using both formal and informal methods. CLE courses are a prime example of formal training. Many firms also arrange for in-house training programs. Formal training is usually done by an outside consultant or someone who can bring a variety of experiences to bear on a particular subject.

Examples of informal training include practice group lunches in which a member of the group lectures on a particular skill or substantive area relevant to the practice. Or a partner taking a group of associates to court, for instance, to observe arguing of a motion. Much can be learned from watching an experienced lawyer in action, or from listening to her talk about the ins and outs of a particular regulation.

The Evaluations Component

Without formal and informal evaluations, associates don't know if they are developing the abilities required to be successful. Formal evaluations usually occur once or twice a year. They should be based on the skills, knowledge and professional behaviors needed at each level of experience. Giving associates

objective information on their strengths and areas in need of improvement allows them to focus on the types of assignments and training that permit them to move to the next level of professional growth.

In the best professional development programs, formal evaluations are an extension of informal evaluations or feedback. Feedback is a motivating force. (See the March 2003 Managing column on "The Power of Informal Feedback.") Feedback should be immediate and occur during as well as at the end of a project. For example, if an associate has turned in a writing assignment in need of major revisions, don't just mark it in red and return it. Sit down with the associate and explain your changes. In this way, it becomes a training opportunity. If you wait until the next formal evaluation to discuss the associate's writing, you've missed an excellent and immediate opportunity for the associate to learn and further develop.

The Mentoring Component

Mentoring is a one-on-one relationship between a partner and an associate. In these relationships, partners do more than answer associates' substantive questions—they also serve as role models for the professional behaviors necessary to succeed as a lawyer. In addition, the mentor is usually available to counsel the associate on career and life-balance issues, what it takes to make it in the firm and how to deal with difficult situations.

In most mentoring programs, the mentor is not the associate's direct supervisor, so the associate can feel more comfortable talking in the most confidential situations. In an effective relationship, the mentor is a conduit for a substantial amount of learning. Note that before a mentoring program

begins, all participants must understand the program's goals and the importance of everyone's active participation, as well as how to be a good mentor or mentee.

Unlock the Magic Door

Mentoring, effective work assignments, training and evaluations, both formal and informal, are the cornerstones of a successful professional development program. By creating and committing to a professional development program, your firm unlocks one of the great secrets of profitable firms—that is, acknowledging that the "care and feeding" of your intellectual capital is essential to your success. LP

Action Plan

- Create or revisit your firm's core goals. What is the firm's purpose? How is it unique from other firms? How will you meet the goals?
- Consider what skills, substantive knowledge and professional behaviors your lawyers need to meet the firm's goals. What tools do they need to build the necessary skills and knowledge?
- Base your professional development program on the goals and tools necessary to reach the goals.
- Design a professional development program with the key components of effective work assignments, training, evaluations and mentoring. It is best to have one individual coordinate the various parts of the program, to avoid duplication of efforts.
- Evaluate the program on a regular basis. Is it meeting the objectives set forth at the beginning of the program? Make necessary changes based on your findings.