

Law Firm Administration A Special Report

Counselor and Confidant?

An in-house career-planning expert helps associates track their course.



BY DAN BINSTOCK

What causes attorneys to move from firm to firm? Many say that their firm's lack of attention to professional development is a main reason they're leaving. As a result, over the past few years law firms have started to give more attention to establishing in-house professional development programs for attorneys.

In addition to improving retention rates, law firms are realizing that professional development programs help to ensure that attorneys maximize their skills, which of course enables them to provide better service to clients.

Many large law firms recently have developed positions such as "director of attorney development" and "professional development manager." These people perform a range of functions—they establish formal training programs, develop mentoring programs, serve as a liaison between associates and partners, manage attorney reviews, integrate new attorneys into the firm, and handle outplacement issues.

While these positions typically focus more on the larger issues of training and developing attorney talent, Washington's Arnold & Porter is one of the first large law firms in the nation to connect attorneys' "big picture" development needs with their individual goals.

ONE-ON-ONE COACHING

The firm has created an in-house position dedicated to providing one-on-one coaching for associates to help them develop and track career goals, and to ensure their overall career satisfaction. As part of the firm's professional development department, the new career development manager provides a bridge to all resources and allows the professional development department to offer a number of services.

In March 2004, Arnold & Porter hired Kristen Powers as career development manager. Before joining Arnold & Porter, Powers, a Georgetown Law graduate and former litigator, was

director of Legal Career Services at Catholic University's Columbus School of Law.

According to Managing Partner Jim Sandman, "We wanted to bring professional development to a personal, individual level and not rely solely on our training programs. We thought our lawyers should be able to get confidential career coaching based on their own needs and goals."

After a year and a half on the job, Powers describes her role as coaching associates in all aspects of career development. She's worked with associates on achieving career development goals, navigating firm resources, seeking out particular types of work, approaching partners with issues or concerns, and handling personality conflicts.

While Powers is an employee of Arnold & Porter, she was hired to work as an advocate specifically for the associates. "The firm wanted somebody—other than an attorney at the firm—to whom the associates could go and speak with individually and confidentially about their careers," she says. "Without the comfort that our discussions are confidential, we would never gain the level of trust that is fundamental to making this type of program work."

Working as an advocate for associates means that Powers has wide latitude in helping them reach their goals, whatever they may be. In some cases, that might even involve helping them look for in-house opportunities or competing firms that may provide better opportunities in their practice interests.

Isn't that counterproductive for the firm? Answers Sandman: "Kristen's approach is critical to her effectiveness. People know she'll be straight with them, and that has to be the starting point for any successful counseling relationship. It would be naïve at best and deceptive at worst for Kristen to advise everyone who consults her that they will find professional satisfaction only here."

A large part of Powers' work focuses on helping associates design and implement career plans. "I spend a lot of time helping associates examine where they are now, and where they ulti-

mately want to be,” Powers says, “whether it’s partnership, working in-house for a client, or the government—and measurable steps they can implement to get there.

“I also help associates create plans to start developing a client base, which will provide them with additional stability and security in their careers. Because studies have shown that writing down goals makes them more likely to be accomplished, this type of planning is very beneficial,” she says.

After a coaching session, Powers also follows up with the associates to see how they’re coming along on their goals, and to discuss any challenges they are facing. She notes, however, that the process is voluntary. “The career plan is for the associate’s personal use; the firm does not connect the achievement of personal career plan goals to bonuses or performance evaluations. I am merely one of the resources to help the associates take control of and be proactive regarding their careers, but I do not in any way force them to do anything.”

Aside from career planning, many associates use Powers as a confidential sounding board to discuss more personal challenges they are facing in their careers, or other issues that they do not feel comfortable discussing with other colleagues. However, if the issues are too personal and Powers does not feel equipped to handle them, she will refer the associates to external professional counselors.

WORD OF MOUTH

As she settles into the job, Powers is starting to have an effect. She says that more than half of the firm’s 310 associates have sought her assistance, most for help in progressing within the firm. Powers admits that she was surprised to see how quickly many associates accepted her role. “As soon as I started, I had people coming in to see me regarding not only problems or issues, but self-improvement. Then, associates began sending their friends to me and the service naturally spread through word of mouth.”

A number of Arnold & Porter associates who have worked with Powers were willing to talk about their experiences, albeit anonymously. One associate says, “It’s great to have an impartial resource within the firm to provide guidance on my personal career development. Although I still discuss my career goals with my colleagues, having Kristen available to discuss ideas with allows me to tailor the information to my own goals. She also provides additional tools for how to assess my own skills and goals and how to leverage them to further my career.”

Another associate adds: “It’s very easy as a young lawyer to view your career narrowly, to pursue the same opportunities that everyone else does, regardless of whether they are a good fit for you. Kristen gets associates to rethink that mindset and consider the kinds of environments and tasks that best suit them. For some people, that leads to other disciplines, other cities, or other firms. For me, it has led to new opportunities and working relationships within the same firm.”

Getting to this point hasn’t always been easy. For example,

Powers has noticed that most associates won’t seek her out unless they’ve met her, or have a personal relationship and a level of trust. “At first, we had to implement a formal plan to educate all the associates on the services we offered, and I visited all of our offices to meet associates face to face,” she says.

Another challenge was combating an initial perception among some that Powers was brought on to provide outplacement services for attorneys who were either being asked to leave, or didn’t have a future at the firm. “While outplacement is one of the services we offer when needed, this is just one part of the broad services we provide,” Powers says. Over time, “the perception that I am an ‘outplacement person’ has dramatically decreased.”

As a legal search consultant, I have seen how Arnold & Porter’s program has provided a competitive edge for recruiting lateral associate candidates. Because most associates consider career development and satisfaction a top priority, prospective job candidates see Arnold & Porter’s investment in this new program as a commitment to these critical areas.

GETTING THE NEWS OUT

While Arnold & Porter was among the first firms to adopt this type of one-on-one career coaching position, many other firms seem to be looking to add this resource. Powers says she receives calls weekly from other law firms interested in doing a similar sort of program.

Several firms have already incorporated similar individual-based career coaching and counseling services for their associates. In June 2004, Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, headquartered in Palo Alto, Calif., hired Jessica Natkin, an attorney and former law school career counselor, as the firm’s career development manager. Natkin’s primary focus is on coaching associates individually on their career development. She also works with firm management to address associate career development on a policy and programmatic level.

And in August 2004, Gardner Carton & Douglas, based in Chicago with a Washington, D.C., office, hired attorney Kathy Morris as its chief career development officer. Morris, with a long history in career counseling for attorneys, provides confidential coaching support for associates and serves as a liaison to management. Aside from career counseling, she advocates for the associates regarding career development, compensation, and path-to-partnership issues.

Given the rapidly growing commitment to individual-based professional development, it seems likely that within the next few years, many more law firms will have incorporated individual career coaching and counseling services into their professional development programs.

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