

THE HUMAN SIDE OF LAW

Client Savvy

By

Anita Lerek, LL.B.

Performing marketing and promotional tasks to gain clients is a harsh reality of modern commercial life. Successful partners and sole practitioners have been all too aware of the close connection between client development and cash flow, as their remuneration is often directly connected with their client/file generation, namely, rainmaking abilities.

The only group that seems to be lacking in client savvy is that of the salaried associate. Usually such associates are lulled into a false sense of security by developing and excelling in their area of specialization, posting high billings, and by enjoying a close relationship with one or more senior partners who would feed them a steady stream of file work generated by said partners' client base. These associates may also be logging in extensive non-billable hours promoting the firm as a whole. So, after 4 to 6 years of tireless labour, these lawyers would look forward to their reward of entering into the partnership.

Perhaps in previous, fatter, years, such a scenario would be a prototype for success. However, in the current era of down or right-sizing firms, the above-noted career path is becoming obsolete. As the business climate has tightened, the client base and ensuing file volume of partners has diminished. So there has been less partner work to be delegated to even the most cherished of juniors. And fewer partnership appointments made.

The bottom line: after 4 to 6 years of superlative hours, billings, specialization, and performance, another legal star is out on the street, unemployed, and without a single client of his or her own as an asset to trade in the only viable lawyer-career marketplace today, namely, the lawyers' rainmaking market. As an intermediate-level lawyer, without a client base of your own, it would be difficult for you to either open up your own practice or entice an established law firm to hire you. So your main option, if you wish to continue practicing law, is to join the growing number of lawyers seeking in-house positions either in government, companies, or associations.

Having a client base helps not just in seeking an alternative if you don't make partner, but also in increasing your chances of making partner. There's nothing like having a few solid clients of your own in order to reassure hirers of the reduced financial risks of taking you on as partner.

So, congratulations, salaried associates, on making it and in the challenging law firm milieu. But do not rest on your laurels. Continue to enhance your skills, billings, and your relationships with your mentor-partners feeding you work. But at the end of the day, don't forget to reserve some time, energy, and mental cunning to securing your livelihood by building up your own client base.

Anita Lerek is president and general counsel of Advocate Placement Ltd. (1-800-461-1275), a nationally based professional human resources and placement company specializing in lawyer placements.