

4 Skills That Lead Associates To Success

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360, Grand Rapids (August 2, 2017, 2:44 PM EDT) -- Law firms can set themselves apart from the competition by impressing clients with standout associates, according to a report out Wednesday, which advises firms to focus on four key strategies to promote associate success.

Forty-six law firms stood out from the pack in a recent survey of corporate counsel, during which participants were asked which firms had the best associates, according to the Law Firms with the Best Associates report by BTI Consulting Group (Wellesley, Mass.).

The report suggested that law firms counted out of the top 46 help improve associates by encouraging them to listen, write, anticipate and research.

Associates trained in listening attentively to clients, writing clearly and concisely, anticipating clients' needs, and extensively and thoroughly researching clients' industries will succeed in gaining the favor of corporate counsel, according to Michael Rynowecer, president of BTI.

Listening well comes naturally to some people, but most need to be trained to be able to hear what the client wants, both by listening to explicit messages and paying attention to the tone and method of how a question is asked, he said.

"If you don't hear what the client wants, what their sensitivities are, what their individual concerns are, you have no chance of being successful," Rynowecer said.

When it comes to writing, Rynowecer said, he's heard clients talk about the topic "for hours," complaining about how most of the text they receive from law firms is long and difficult to read. Instead, associates should be taught to distill complex information into clear and concise writing that clients can absorb quickly, he said.

And learning to anticipate clients' needs and meticulously research clients' industries shows associates how to fill the role of irreplaceable adviser early on in their careers so the attorneys develop tight-knit relationships with clients while moving toward partnership, Rynowecer explained.

Five of eight law firms recognized as having the best-of-the-best associates on BTI's list of 46 firms offered their insight into how they promote success among their young attorneys.

“Ropes & Gray lawyers perform at a high level, and our clients reward us with more interesting work. Being able to offer that kind of interesting, cutting-edge work helps attract the best lawyers to our firm, and it provides even more opportunities for our associates to grow and develop,” said Bill Knowlton, co-chair of hiring and development at Ropes & Gray LLP.

“Our partners take seriously our role as stewards of the firm and feel a responsibility to position the next generation of leaders to succeed,” Knowlton added.

Larry Barden, chair of the management committee at Sidley Austin LLP, said that career-long learning and development is modeled and expected at his law firm.

“Sidley is deeply invested in the professional development of our associates, and the firm has a long history of formal and informal training and feedback,” Barden said. “For instance, we encourage our partners to include associates in client activity including pitches and events.”

At Jones Day, young attorneys are instilled with the firm’s values of collaboration, according to Glen Nager, Jones Day’s client affairs partner.

“As an integrated law firm serving clients as one firm worldwide, our commitment to client service means we recognize that partners and associates alike contribute in a variety of ways, our lawyers work together in an atmosphere where teamwork is essential, respect for and from colleagues is the norm, and credit is shared for a job well done,” Nager said.

Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP Chair Jami Wintz McKeon said her firm often hears from clients that they consider its associates to be one of its great assets and a competitive advantage for the firm.

“Clients can’t get to know associates they aren’t meeting,” McKeon said. “We present our full team and do not leave our associates behind the scenes ... [and] our associates do real work — interesting, substantive, and meaningful to both them and our clients.”

Deborah Barnard, professional growth & development partner at Holland & Knight LLP, said associate training at her law firm is both formal and on the job.

“We try to provide associates with as much exposure to clients as practicable in addition to helping them learn the clients’ businesses, needs and objectives. We also provide formal training on communication skills, including how to write an effective email to a client, and every associate receives feedback on their interpersonal skills,” Barnard said.

--Editing by Edrienne Su.