

How Firms Can Break Free Of Rainmaker Dependency

By **Dan Packel**

Law360, New York (August 26, 2014, 2:43 PM ET) -- In today's tight legal market, firms have more reason than ever to reduce their reliance on rainmakers to maintain a healthy bottom line. But while it's important to make firmwide efforts to broaden the base of attorneys actively bringing in business, experts say there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

"There are a few firms out there that seemingly rely on a star rainmaker system, but the truth is, all firms would like to generate business from a wide range of lawyers," said Peter Zeughauser, a legal industry strategist with Zeughauser Group LLC.

Success will follow only if firms orient their efforts towards individuals and eschew generic strategies.

Focus on Individuals

Expecting every attorney to develop into a superstar rainmaker would be foolish, but it's not unreasonable to want everyone to play some role in generating business. Still, firm leaders will succeed in tapping into this potential only if they recognize that different attorneys have different strengths.

"Just putting out a blanket program — one that says you need to subscribe to the following things — doesn't work," said Randy Vulakovich, the chief business development officer at Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney PC. "Where we have found the most success is tailoring on an individual lawyer basis."

His firm is one of a number that have embraced the idea of having attorneys craft individual plans for business development strategies. A current program, which Vulakovich referred to as "Business Development 101," divides 18 lawyers into two groups of nine. After a group kickoff session with a coach, participants develop custom plans with specific goals.

Montgomery McCracken Walker & Rhoads LLP has taken the idea of individual planning even further, insisting that each attorney in the firm — from first-year associates fresh out of law school to senior partners on the verge of retirement — prepare their own custom plans, with help from one of the co-chairs of each of the firm's two larger divisions.

These plans are then used to develop ideas — perhaps an attorney should seek to join a particular board, for example — and to determine how to best apportion marketing funds.

"The thought is that we would help them understand how we can help them fulfill individual goals," said

Lou Petroni, vice chairman and executive partner at the firm. "Not everyone can be a rainmaker, but everyone can do something."

Start Early

Since, by and large, law schools teach little in the way of business development skills, experts recommend introducing new associates to the basics soon after their arrival.

"Once they're on partnership track, a lot of lawyers look in the mirror and say, 'To get to that level, I need to start bringing in clients,'" Vulakovich said.

Programming that starts as early as the first year is one way to keep this from being a startling revelation for rising attorneys, as long as it is not overwhelming.

"From Day 1, they need to hear about business development, but I believe they need to ramp it up gradually over time," said Cynthia Pladziewicz, the principal of Professional Development Perspectives. "If a lawyer can't master the practice of law, then being a rainmaker doesn't much matter."

And it's possible to consider business development goals even earlier, taking account candidates' potential strengths in the area when hiring out of law school.

"As we interview candidates in the younger ranks, people who have a demonstrated entrepreneurial spirit — whether they're active in legal professional activities, in nonprofits, in the community — it's an added factor for whether to hire someone," Petroni said.

Teams Work Too

Individual lawyers all have their own strengths and weaknesses, but the latter can be minimized and the former can be maximized through teamwork.

Recognizing that attorneys often work together while pitching new clients, Zeughauser advocates training programs that include a focus on team-play skills, so that lawyers work together better during client pitches.

Pladziewicz recommends that lawyers partner with others who might have strengths in areas where they are weak.

One example is the cocktail party, dreaded by some, embraced by others. She notes that often, even individuals who succeed on the scene fail to consolidate their gains.

"They come up with 30 people they ought to follow up with; they follow up with two," Pladziewicz said. "I suggest to those people, take a solid associate with you, one who is good at attending to detail and follow-up."

In doing so, partners can leverage mentorship opportunities into tangible benefits.

"Firms are typically very good at providing mentors for work, and they just, for whatever reason, don't do that nearly as well for business development," Pladziewicz said.

At Montgomery McCracken, in addition to the individual plans, practice groups have also been asked to prepare group marketing plans, with the goal of giving "younger lawyers the ability to participate in pitches and watch the rainmakers in action," Petroni said.

But observation doesn't guarantee success, says Zeughauser, who stresses that these skills are idiosyncratic.

"For some, watching it and being part of it is useful; for others, it isn't," he said. "This is one of one of these things where there's really different strokes for different folks."

Give Rewards

Unsurprisingly, attorneys respond to incentives. The challenge is that everyone is wired differently.

"For some, it's monetary; for others, psychic awards matter — it validates how good of a lawyer they are to be able attract clients," Zeughauser said. "In the end, it's not always clear what makes some incentives better than others."

For partners, the financial incentives of bringing in new business should be obvious, but that's not always the case.

"I'm shocked when I work with younger partners and they don't understand the relative compensation attached to business development," Pladziewicz said.

She emphasizes that firms should be transparent and careful about how they structure these rewards.

"The way firms set up their metrics is going to incentivize the right things or the wrong things," she said.

One consideration is whether to compensate associates who bring in new work. Associates who are excluded from financial consideration might bear grievances against the firm for lack of recognition — the opposite of what a good incentive system is designed to create.

In addition to bringing in new work, one crucial area of business development is growing business with existing clients, and this effort comes with clear psychological rewards, according to Vulakovich. Plus, lawyers don't need to excel on the cocktail party circuit to benefit.

"I think the biggest motivating factor is when the client says, 'You're our partners; you're an extension of our team. Here's another matter,'" he said.

Look Outside

Some, but not all, firms rely on outside coaches to teach business development strategies to lawyers who show promise.

Pladziewicz says her clients usually fall into two distinct categories: new partners and those on the verge of partnership, or long-established partners who are looking to become rainmakers. She emphasizes the importance of individual assessments, like those at Montgomery McCracken, to develop a plan that plays to individual strengths.

"We'll craft a plan that has little of what they don't like in it," she said.

One key consideration is who foots the bill for coaching. While some firms ask attorneys to cover all or part of the cost, so that participants "have some skin in the game," others pay for the entire cost, recognizing the importance of the effort, according to Zeughauser.

And, as with all of these strategies, it's essential to consider individual needs when selecting a coach, taking into account chemistry with the lawyer and more.

"There are a lot out there; some will fit, some won't," Vulakovich said. "You need to identify the coaches who will fit with the culture of the firm."

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