
Ticket to the top

Author: Legal week

02 Feb 2006 | 00:00 | 

Not all that long ago, I was told the story of a senior associate at one of the City's most well-known and profitable firms who was taken out by the managing partner for a 'swift drink' after work. After a bit of discreet and self-conscious mumbling along the lines of: "I've had my eye on you for some time", the associate was offered a cigar and the immortal line: "We think it's time you were one of us". So unprepared for the event was the recipient, that it took a moment for him to realise that he was being offered partnership rather than some barely imaginable alternative.

For many associates, and certainly to an outsider, the road to partnership seems shrouded in mystery, even in the most progressive and transparent of firms. As an occupational psychologist who advises on selection methods, I am seldom invited to comment on the more informal procedures that have evolved at firms over the years, but even when I am involved in the more formal selection processes - those where the latter stages include panel interviews, presentations and assessment centres - it still seems that law firms are a law unto themselves when it comes to partner admissions. Two things stand out:

- . The amount of time and effort some firms invest in lengthy final assessment procedures that make very little difference to the outcome. The road to partnership is so long and the candidate's progress so well-understood, that by the time that the final denouement takes place, the decision is seldom in doubt.

- . The number of opinions and amount of information that is obtained during the process, through the numerous 'soundings' and from the formal assessments that take place; and how little of this useful, high-quality 'data' is used to benefit the candidate by way of coaching, counselling and feedback.

I am not suggesting for one moment that the partner admissions procedures at some firms are somehow rigged, or even flawed - when it comes to drawing up the final list to put to the vote, law firms take the business of selecting partners very seriously indeed - it simply seems that so few candidates are turned away in the closing stages, that these processes are rather more like rites of passage than selection procedures. The symbolic value of having to gain the firm's final approval is immense and should not be underestimated, but much of the utility may well be lost. So much more could be made of the investment.

Procedurally at least, current practice in the larger law firms is not unlike the kind of thing seen in the big accountancy firms four or five years ago. While, notionally, a nurturing process that identified suitable candidates for sponsorship and coaching 12 to 18 months out, the final stages were heavily biased towards assess-

ment rather than development. Full-blown assessment centres with roleplays and group exercises were the norm and, while candidates were given a certain amount of developmental feedback, no-one had any doubt that the process was primarily a 'hurdle' to be cleared. The accountancy firms' 'then' differs from law firms' 'now', in that significant numbers of candidates fell at this final hurdle. There were two related reasons for this:

- . The accountancy firms were already large, but had grown larger through mergers at home and acquisitions overseas. The scale of the problem made it difficult to keep track of the growing pool of partner candidates through traditional methods and led to inconsistent quality at the assessment centres.

- . Some local partners were unsure of the required standard or were unwilling to deliver the tough message that one of their senior associates/managers was not ready or was not suitable for partnership. Instead they would sponsor and even encourage their associates, leaving it to the assessment centre to 'sort things out' - or take the blame.

Not surprisingly, this situation created a certain amount of resentment, not to mention a raft of 'walking wounded' who hung around listlessly waiting for the opportunity to make their careers elsewhere. The accountancy firms' sensible response to this was actually to do what some of them only said they were doing, and to make the process much more developmental. In essence this involved:

- . formalising a level immediately below that of partner as an explicit stepping stone towards partnership. In many cases, this kind of 'director' role already existed, but it was either possible to bypass, or it was used as 'consolation prize';

- . introducing a development centre to appoint directors and to identify their development needs with respect to partnership;

- . sharing and using all of the data collected to formulate individually tailored 'development plans';

- . managing the subsequent development of directors centrally, with full support from learning & development functions within HR; . re-positioning the (simplified) final partner admissions procedures as ones designed to 'confirm' rather than 'assess' the candidate's suitability; and . evidence of having addressed one's develop-

mental needs and client feedback largely carrying the day with the panel.

Apart from gaining a promotion, the main benefit for those successful at these new development centres is the explicit acknowledgement that they are 'on track' for partnership. With the cat out of the bag, it is possible for these individuals to receive the full, public support of the firm in the pursuit of their development.

While it would be naive to suppose that those who are unsuccessful feel no resentment about the new regime, at least their disappointment comes two or three years earlier in their careers than it would otherwise have done, allowing them more time to re-focus. Importantly, the same support is offered to all; whether successful at the centre or not.

So what kind of skills find their way into directors' development plans? A certain amount of professional expertise is taken as read, so their development needs tend to be around the 'softer' skills associated with effective leadership, for example: motivating and developing others, client relationship management, and for want of better words - 'project management' skills, that can be coached.

With the current levels of merger activity in the legal sector, and as firms extend their global reach, it is possible to see similar things happening within law firms. There has already been a movement in this direction, with firms making salaried partnership a necessary step on the road to full equity status - but few have gone the whole hog and restructured their assessment processes within a more supportive, developmental framework. This would be a better use of the time and effort currently spent on selection procedures, after which very little selection actually takes place.

The extent to which financial considerations do or should influence the decision to admit to partnership could easily be the subject of another article, but suffice to say that if someone is definitely on track, they can be much more openly involved in writing their own business case and in turning it into reality.

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