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ANALYSIS

Preparing for life beyond the firm

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Voyage of discovery: Jonathan Cohen, Philip Beddows, Janet Gaymer and Francis Neate at mentoring firm Iddas help lawyers to see themselves as people and not just legal eagles to help them find new challenging opportunities

Retirement can be a particularly difficult and challenging time for top lawyers, **Richard Brass** finds. But mentoring can help these professionals reinvent themselves for a new role

When most chief executives of prominent companies decide it's time to step down, there's no shortage of options. Barring serious disgrace, the experience of running a major operation is a precious asset that opens up seats on boards all over town and brings invitations to put those skills to use in all kinds of organisations.

But when Guy Beringer announced last month that he would be stepping

down from the top job at international law firm Allen & Overy after eight years in charge, the usual rules did not apply.

He told The Daily Telegraph that finding a suitable new role was quite a challenge. "Although you have experience of running a major professional services firm for eight years, you are not viewed as someone with management experience," he said. "You would not be offered the posts that you would be offered if you had that post in another professional services arena."

It's not that Mr Beringer is being singled out for neglect. Finding a new role after a successful career in their chosen field presents difficulties for lawyers that most other professionals manage to avoid.

Bill Knight, former senior partner at Simmons & Simmons, noted recently that, while all five commissioners of the US Securities and Exchange Commission are lawyers, the board of the UK's Financial Services Authority was bereft of former senior partners. He also said an experienced headhunter had told him she had never been asked for a lawyer to fill a board vacancy.

Stepping outside the game is a strange moment in a lawyer's career. After a lifetime spent achieving great things, being highly sought-after and reaching the highest office in complex and competitive organisations, finding themselves suddenly unwanted can come as a nasty shock to legal professionals. The biggest challenge for senior lawyers is reinvention, according to Janet Gaymer, also former senior partner at Simmons & Simmons, who recently faced exactly that existential moment all top lawyers must go through if they are to progress beyond their profession.

"People have a natural reaction to someone who has been a lawyer," she says. "Lawyers' skills are perceived to be very specific and there's a stereotypical view of lawyers which is sometimes not helpful when that person wants to do something completely different from lawyering."

A year after stepping down as senior partner, Gaymer has joined a new panel set up by mentoring firm Iddas with the aim of providing legal professionals with the kind of counsel that can help them through this surprisingly difficult time in their careers.

Alongside two other senior professionals, former Linklaters managing partner Terence Kyle and former Slaughter and May partner Francis Neate, she will be offering guidance and insights based on her own experience and her intimate knowledge of the lawyering mentality to help her peers prepare for life beyond the firm.

"Many people don't necessarily associate lawyers with commercial judgments, or with having managerial or leadership skills," she says. "The reality is that many lawyers have been doing all of those things during their time in private practice, but the outside world sees people as lawyers, full-stop. The profession has got quite a selling job to do for itself in many ways.

"The challenge is trying to get lawyers, when their co-ordinates change, to understand what that means in practice. And that can mean quite a voyage of discovery, as I found myself. Maybe the lawyers have themselves to blame a bit, because one of the problems is that lawyers don't always think about doing something other than lawyering.

"That's where mentoring can play a role, because it can get people to think about what might be out there as an opportunity."

Mentoring has become standard practice across many different sectors in recent years, at all levels of organisations, but the law is one field where it has been slow to be adopted. That is beginning to change, Gaymer says.

"Mentoring at more junior levels is beginning to be more widespread, certainly in some of the larger City law firms. The notions of talent development, overall employability, and all that kind of thing, are now rising up the agenda of those in charge of law firms very, very rapidly.

"And it's a very important issue, because the lawyers are the firm, and making sure they're retained and making

sure that the most is made of what they have to offer is extremely important, because the market's extremely mobile and it's very competitive."

But being expected to trust a relative stranger enough to discuss your future does not come easily to lawyers, particularly more senior ones who have built long careers on anything but trust.

"Lawyers are trained to be wary," says Gaymer. "But equally they are intellectually curious. They have to be to do the job. So there's a bit of tension between the wariness and the thirst for knowledge.

"That's where mentoring comes in. It encourages self-development, in the sense that it's the lawyer who is exercising the brain and asking himself or herself what it is they want to do, where they want to go, and just helping that process, trying to point in a direction that perhaps has not been thought about previously. And it's getting the lawyer to see themselves as a person as opposed to as a lawyer."

Iddas director Philip Beddows says getting through lawyers' deeply ingrained sense of themselves as lawyers is a crucial first step in the process of helping them to see opportunities they may never have thought about before.

"I've never met a lawyer who hasn't been very wary when you first meet them, wanting to know what your credentials are and how you can really help them," he says. "Litigators are particularly interesting.

"I think a lot of them, because of the early feedback they get, find it difficult to see themselves shed of the lawyer's clothing, and they're therefore likely to think they're not sure whether anyone can really help. So they have far less self-confidence in this situation than clients from other businesses.

"A lot of that lack of confidence is due to the fact that their identity is wrapped up so strongly with being a lawyer. I think starting to broaden lawyers at a younger age to see themselves as more than just a lawyer is very important, because it will do a lot more to help them as they become a more critical rainmaking partner in their relationship to clients, as well as help them make that transition out of law later."

What does it take to be an effective mentor? Janet Gaymer believes those skills are basic ones. "You've got to be a good listener. You've got to be able to transfer your own experiences, to make those meaningful to the person you're dealing with.

"And you've got to be prepared to say what you think." That at least should not pose a problem for lawyers.

Making the most of mentoring

MENTORING has become increasingly common throughout business in recent years, even at the very highest levels. It can produce immense professional and personal benefits to both mentor and mentee, provided some important guidelines are observed.

Focus on the mentee: The mentor's role is to respond to the mentee's needs in terms of development. Mentors should not impose their own agenda.

Responsibility: Both parties should take responsibility for progressing the partnership.

Confidentiality: Anything discussed between mentor and mentee must be treated in strictest confidence.

Openness: Both mentor and mentee should be open and truthful with each other.

Time limits: Mentors and mentees should respect each other's time and responsibilities and make sure they don't impose on each other.

Progress: The mentor should provide constructive feedback, while the mentee should address any areas for development.

Support not advice: The mentor should not offer specific advice, but instead challenge and support the mentee.