



Throughout their careers, partners can learn much from a designated mentor — someone who can pass on their professional experience, both outside and inside the law. Philip Beddows reports

During the past year or two, much has been written and spoken about the challenges facing lawyers who seek to pursue a career outside law, particularly those who seek a role on the board of a company. A recent letter to the editor of the *Financial Times*, written by a Birmingham lawyer in response to an article on how City lawyers could be more welcome on boards, was bold enough to state that City solicitors are simply not 'businessmen', and that the same could not be said of solicitors outside the City. I could hear the pencils being sharpened in reply, not as swords, but in written riposte to this inflammatory charge.

But if the Birmingham lawyer is right, the picture he painted in his letter is not

always so for City solicitors. It is true that there are many lawyers who maintain close, high-level strategic relationships with boards of companies they represent; but there are many more who operate in a transactional relationship at an increasing distance from the day-to-day commercial interactions of their clients. This serves to encourage others to place the lawyer in an ever-more limiting box. The end result can be that when a lawyer reaches retirement from the partnership at an age that leaves them with many years of productive work ahead, they can find it hard to carve out a new path for themselves. They have to fight valiantly against the perceptions of headhunters, and others, about the value a lawyer can offer beyond legal practice.

The answer to these challenges may lie in the way in which lawyers are helped to develop their careers and challenge the perceptions they hold of themselves, which reinforce those of others.

Career paths for lawyers have been discussed a lot of late, with 'Generation Y' being a particularly hot topic. Firms have developed a multiplicity of new career paths in response to the different desires and needs of talented individuals and as part of diversity strategies. With these new paths has come a raft of new titles and roles that reflect differing contributions and engagements. Decision-making processes have been streamlined and equity models will continue to change. All-equity partnerships are becoming much rarer and more diverse structures are being shaped to enable the retention, development and transition of a wider range of partners and, perhaps, even to anticipate future economic changes.

The current business climate for lawyers may be looked back on as halcyon days, when profits per equity partner

(PEP) and activity hit all-time highs and London became the world's centre for financial and professional services. At this pinnacle moment, debate rages over the long-term impact on law firms' culture and their public image of too great a focus on PEP — at times one could be forgiven for thinking that one was hearing about the short-term value of a post-listing law firm share price, such is the apparent emphasis on this singular metric.

In the midst of these heady times, lawyers continue to navigate their own peculiar professional service firm career life-cycle, which is marked by key transition points in their careers. The way in which these stages are managed can have a positive or negative impact on the future direction and success of an individual lawyer's career and life. This is where career mentoring can be a great help — on the way into partnership (internal or lateral), on their way up within a firm and on the way out at the point of retirement, or preferably well before.

On achieving partnership it can be all too easy to feel as if one has arrived, without fully appreciating where it is that one has arrived at. Partnership is certainly not a point of conclusion, but the key transition point in the career of some and a step up into territory where the game rules have changed. The range of skills and attributes that enabled them to win through to this stage will not propel them up to the next level — they will need to adopt a different matrix of skills and behaviours for that. The additional transition from salaried to equity partner brings another change in gear that can catch people out if they have not made the necessary adjustments.

At each point of change in a partner's



A RECENT LETTER TO THE *FINANCIAL TIMES* WAS BOLD ENOUGH TO STATE THAT CITY SOLICITORS ARE SIMPLY NOT 'BUSINESSMEN'

career, they can gain real value from a mentor. Many people looking back on a successful career can often identify one or two individuals who helped them to make it; sometimes these people were influential sponsors within the firm and other times they were outside. Mentoring is sometimes thought of as an internal activity and coaching as an external intervention. In practice, both may be provided from within but an outside resource brings with it an inherent objectivity, confidentiality and independence.

To return to the opening theme of this

article, perhaps the most valuable contribution an external mentor can bring is insights and connections to the world outside the law, helping lawyers from an earlier stage in their career to think of themselves as being more than just a lawyer. If they could begin to think of themselves as businessmen and women, that self-perception may transform the way in which they manage their practice, the level and quality of relationships they develop in the world outside and the personal brand they represent in the external market.

stock.xing

It may be helpful if each individual, on arriving in their chosen law firm, starts to think that what they have actually done is launch their own law venture, with themselves as the sole partner and the 'firm' their sole client, whose own clients' needs they exist to service. In reality, even if we do not think it, we are all one-person enterprises and, critically, each of us has gifts that remain unused in our current work environment but which could be the key to our futures as well as provide added value in the present.

As part of the wider training and development of lawyers, firms often face unique issues in managing partner careers, of which some are:

- partners are so busy working on current matters that they seldom dedicate time or seek advice in regard to their longer-term futures;
- many have spent all or a significant part of their careers with one firm. If they do reflect on the future they can be daunted by not knowing 'what lies over the precipice';
- lawyers regard themselves as specialists in their own field and question the value of their skills and experience in the 'outside' world; and
- partners are often reluctant to discuss their future with colleagues in case this gives the impression of 'putting their hand up' to leave. They are reluctant to start a ball rolling which might become difficult to stop.

The solution to these issues may be for law firms to extend career planning to an earlier stage in a partner's career and to encompass life beyond a full-time partnership role. In our experience, partners who begin to gain a sharper focus on their career and life can often end up better motivated and performing at a higher level than before. They may

begin to conceive new ways in which they could bring added value to their firm and remain healthily productive. Anticipated demographic changes suggest that this will be an increasingly important issue in law firms.

Managing the years towards retirement is important for the firm and individual partner. Individuals need to be more proactive in planning a life beyond law and the creation of an alumni who will be goodwill ambassadors for life has to be in the wider interests of the firm, not just the individual partners. I once met a head of department who admitted that they had spent the previous few years before retirement distracted by worry about what to do next.

According to a *Financial Times* review of ex-Citigroup chairman Sandy Weill's recent biography, he needed the services of a psychiatrist to help adjust to a new life of semi-retirement. He, like senior lawyers, could have benefited from a much earlier review that prepared him well ahead of time for the major transition in his business and personal life. Reinvention can be hard work. Even more recent comment on Weill's successor, Charles Prince, a lawyer, has centred on his transition from legal counsel to the helm of Citigroup and the degree to which a banking background could have been more helpful. The truth is that Prince heads the world's biggest bank and is the premier exemplar of a lawyer in the world outside law, whatever one's views on the strategy of Citigroup.

An external mentor can provide valuable support to the development of partners, assisting those who are of most value to maintain focus and commitment, without the impending distraction of worries about the future. In addition, it could assist those who are beginning

to feel they may no longer be valuable to the firm to think practically about transitioning out, at an earlier stage — reducing the likelihood of more difficult conversations in later years.

A personal strategy is as important to the successful development of a partner and their practice as a business plan. Without personal focus, business focus is much less likely to be achieved.

Firstly, one must have better definition — a case of Delphic 'know thyself'. The experience of being mentored will help partners gain perspectives from outside the lawyer's box and enable them to progress their career more effectively. A partner being mentored will learn more about themselves and their wider personal skills and characteristics. It may be particularly valuable at the point of entry into partnership and help them develop a sense of mission in the firm and their life beyond. They will find it useful to expand their network and build a more strategic range of relationships; and this in turn will help them, as the time nears for them to retire from law, into a brave and exciting new world outside.

That is why we have a talented and eclectic team of businesspeople, all of whom have successfully made significant transitions themselves and can provide content-rich mentoring that transfers real-life commercial experience to accelerate learning and open up new avenues for lawyers. This unique ensemble now includes three leading lawyers: Janet Gaymer, former senior partner of Simmons & Simmons; former Linklaters managing partner Terence Kyle; and Kirkland & Ellis counsel Francis Neate. ■

Philip Beddows is a partner at IDDA, which provides a mentoring and coaching service.