

# LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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## LI Feature

LEGAL INDUSTRY/BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

# Tailored Training

## Five Professional Development Tips for Each Attorney Stage



**MARY KATE SHERIDAN**  
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*“To develop good leaders long term, you need to target professional development programming.”*

**ALLISON FRIEND**  
Chief Human  
Resources Officer,  
Blank Rome



The term professional development often calls to mind a conference room packed with associates and partners, eating a catered lunch while listening to a generalized Continuing Legal Education (CLE) class. While there is certainly value in these kinds of training programs, modern professional development offers attorneys so much more. With greater emphasis on professional development today than ever before, attorneys benefit from a range of training and innovative methods, including programs tailored specifically to their practice level.

“To develop good leaders long term, you need to target professional development programming,” says Allison Friend, Chief Human Resources Officer at Blank Rome. Offerings customized by professional level provide attorneys with skills that are immediately relevant to their current practice or that help build a foundation for long-term success.

Here are five tips for capturing the most critical aspects of professional development for each level of an attorney’s career: junior associate, mid-level and senior associates, junior partner and senior partner.

### JUNIOR

#### 1. Start Business Development and Management Training Early

It is never too early to expose junior associates to business development and management skills. “A training program that’s a comprehensive program will build elements of all of those skills from the very beginning,” says Ida Abbott, Founder of Ida Abbott Consulting. “If you do it right, by the time somebody becomes a partner, they’re already adept at doing those things. They just need to shift their perspective.”

In fact, at some firms, like Blank Rome, junior associates receive credit for bringing in new business. “At Blank Rome, it’s ingrained in our culture that business development and client development are critical skills to learn at a junior level,” says Friend, who suggests providing juniors with an overview of client service and client-based communication, as well as networking experience.

#### 2. Stress the Need for Internal Networking

An introduction to networking within the firm is also useful to a junior associate's developing career. Through internal networking, an associate will get to know senior attorneys and partners, connect with potential mentors and gain exposure within the firm, and develop a better understanding of his or her passion, says Friend. Administrators can assist junior attorneys by training on the importance of meeting others within the firm and working on a variety of matters with different attorneys, as well as providing tips on how to network, says Friend.

### 3. Offer a Law Firm MBA

The practice of law is no longer just about law; business skills have become critical to long-term success. Junior associates "need to understand how clients operate in order to fully serve those clients," says Abbott. "They must also be able to use basic business tools and software and to understand at least rudimentary finance principles."

### 4. Focus on Writing

Communication is everything in a successful legal career. "Learning to write and research differently than you did in law school, whether you're a corporate lawyer or a business lawyer, is important," says Friend. Given the highly digital nature of modern communication, firms shouldn't train merely on memo and brief writing but also on everyday client communication like email and text message, says Friend. Such training reinforces that digital communication should be treated just as formally as other communications despite its generally casual and immediate nature.

### 5. Teach Professionalism

Professionalism is another area of importance for juniors. As discussed in "A Roundtable Discussion: What Law Firms Expect From New Lawyers," featured in ABA Law Practice Division's March 2013 edition of *Law Practice Today*, junior attorneys should focus on cultivating softer skills like building respectful internal relationships and engaging in effective communication. One firm that offers professionalism training for juniors is Andrews Kurth. The firm explores topics including what professionalism means, the importance of appropriate and timely communication, and the value of doing "good work," says Amy Sladczyk Hancock, Director of Professional Development at Andrews Kurth.



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### MIDLEVEL/SENIOR ASSOCIATE

#### 1. Implement Small Group Learning

As associates become more senior, they may benefit from learning in smaller groups rather than large classes. Through small groups, mid-level and senior associates can hone in on both common group goals and individual objectives as they work with their peers and outside

*rudimentary finance principles.”*

**IDA ABBOTT**  
Ida Abbott  
Consulting



consultants, says Abbott.

## 2. Include More Sophisticated Business Development Learning

Once an associate is at the mid- or senior-level, business development training should be more sophisticated and focus on how to serve clients effectively, develop one's network and acquire more business, as well as how to lead teams and develop people effectively, says Friend. For example, on a practical level, a mid-level or senior associate may learn about which conferences are most beneficial and how to use an association meeting to his or her advantage, she says. Further, firms should encourage mid-level and senior associates to start thinking more strategically as they do their everyday work, says Abbott.

## 3. Continue Hands-On Learning

Hands-on learning continues to be essential as attorneys move into more senior levels. “Any opportunities to do hands-on learning, shadow another attorney — those are going to be golden opportunities for learning and legal skills development, and you want those instilled throughout a person's career,” says Hancock. Administrators can promote hands-on learning by offering pro bono opportunities, secondments or partnerships with a city organization through which attorneys can gain practical experience, she says.

## 4. Focus on Management

Management becomes particularly relevant at the mid-level and senior associate stage because associates begin to oversee certain aspects of cases, like discovery or briefs. Among the areas that are key at this stage are thinking about managing deals, delegating down and mentoring younger associates, says Hancock.

## 5. Don't Forget Mentoring and Advising

Firms place a lot of emphasis on mentoring junior associates, but these types of relationships continue to be vital as attorneys progress through the ranks. In fact, according to a [2011 research report by National Association of Law Placement \(NALP\) Foundation and West LegalEdcenter](#), 95 percent of the nearly 1,500 law firm associates surveyed, ranked mentoring and on-the-job training as the top professional development offerings.

Organic mentoring is absolutely critical, but firms should also facilitate formal mentoring for mid-level and senior associates. “We want somebody who is really sitting down and advising you on your career,” says Friend, whose firm Blank Rome assigns advisers by attorney level. According to Friend, advisers should counsel associates on the specific legal and professional skills they should strive to develop and the types of networks they should join, as well as advocate for the associates as they work toward goals.





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**AMY SLADCZYK  
HANCOCK**  
Director of  
Professional  
Development,  
Andrews Kurth



## NEW PARTNER

### 1. Embrace Sponsorship

Sponsorship is a critical development tool at the partnership level. Ideally, a new partner will connect with a practice group leader or senior partner in his or her group who will advocate for the new partner internally, says Friend. This sponsor should also become an adviser to the new partner, offering guidance and helping in such areas as building a practice, developing leadership skills and creating a business plan, she says.

### 2. Offer Individualized Attention and Coaching

Once an attorney reaches the partner level, individualized training becomes paramount. One-on-one coaching is a useful tool to help new partners make smooth transitions to their new roles. Coaching is useful because it is goal-oriented and occurs in real time, allowing partners to focus week to week on pushing their practices forward, says Deborah Katz Solomon — Executive Coach for lawyers and Founder of Acuity Legal Consulting LLC — who usually works with new partners over a three-to-five month period.

### 3. Shift The Mindset

One-on-one coaching also assists new partners in the important step of shifting their mindset from working as associates to operating as business developers and team leaders. “Developing new clients and managing teams of attorneys requires a different skill set than the straight up practice of law,” says Solomon. “To be successful, new partners must renew their focus on professional development and then make time to follow through.”

### 4. Learn Through Teaching

Teaching fellow attorneys is particularly useful in polishing presentation skills. “Any time a partner has to prepare to deliver on any topic, he or she has to prepare, practice, hone presentation skills, and get feedback on his or her delivery of information,” says Hancock. “That is a training opportunity in itself. The partner can take his or her feedback and use it for the next client pitch.”

### 5. Reinforce Business Development and Leadership Skills

Once attorneys have reached the partnership, they should have already received years of training in business development and management, but these topics continue to be vital in ongoing development. “What you have is a continuum, a process of practicing and perfecting these skills over time,” says Abbott, who notes that business development and leadership become critical for junior partners. Among the leadership areas new partners should specifically focus include when to be decisive, when to build consensus, how to build trust, how to set the course and how to plan strategically, says Abbott.



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*“To be successful, new partners must renew their focus on professional development and then make time to follow through.”*

**DEBORAH KATZ  
SOLOMON**

*Founder, Acuity  
Legal Consulting LLC*



## **SENIOR PARTNER**

### **1. Facilitate Discussions**

For senior partners, discussion may be one of the most effective means of development. “Experienced partners often benefit from a less structured format that includes facilitated discussion with their peers,” says Solomon. She recommends gathering a small group of partners to discuss common challenges and best practices. More experienced partners are often as interested in each other’s ideas as they are the advice of an outside expert, she says.

### **2. Focus on Business Leadership Skills**

Even senior partners need support when it comes to leadership. Administrators should include training in leading people and business management skills among their development offerings. “It’s one thing to lead a case or matter, but it’s another thing to lead a business line and the people who support it,” says Friend, who likens leading a practice area to leading small business.

### **3. Think Big**

By the time an attorney is a senior partner, he or she likely has a successful routine for pitching new business and managing complex matters. The opportunity for attorneys at this level is to think on a grander scale. “The focus there is playing a bigger game,” says Solomon. For example, some partners may wish to expand their practice into new areas, while others may focus on being more effective in firm leadership roles, she says.

### **4. Develop a Comprehensive Vision**

After finding success as a senior partner, attorneys may become fixated on their routines and closed off from the way law practice is evolving. “Senior lawyers need to understand those changes and how they impact their practice, and they need to be able to adapt,” says Abbott. Having a comprehensive vision of the changing legal landscape and its effect on the firm is imperative for successful leadership. “As leaders they need to understand what people on the front line are thinking and experiencing,” says Abbott.

### **5. Look Down for Technology**

For some senior partners, modern technology is a foreign aspect of today’s practice of law. In many instances, the more junior attorneys in the firm may be more adept at using technological tools than the senior attorneys. This scenario provides an opportunity for reverse mentoring through which less seasoned attorneys can offer guidance to more senior lawyers, says Hancock.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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