

Soap box

Pat Tomlin



HOW do you keep and motivate senior associates in your firm who won't necessarily make it to partner?

Consolidation in the professional services sector is making the attraction and retention of high-calibre talent increasingly critical for growth. But the path to partnership status is becoming more competitive and challenging. The role itself is increasingly complex and demanding, combining the requirement for aggressive income generation and business development with commercial acumen, financial management and good leadership skills (both of people and the business). This is on top of maintaining a first class professional reputation.

One of the critical challenges facing professional firms, given this context, is how they retain and continue to motivate talented people who may not make it to partner (or not yet) – but who still have an extremely valuable role to play within the firm.

In instances where individuals probably do have longer-term potential, as well as the ambition and the stamina to operate at partner level, the answer is straightforward, although not necessarily easy.

Honest and constructive feedback on where they are now, as against where they need to be, is absolutely key. This allows you to draw up realistic development plans, both in terms of what is achievable and over what timescale. For example, to what extent are the aspirations outlined in an appraisal or performance review meeting really achievable, in the context of timescales, fully developed skill-sets, expectations of the role and availability of opportunity?

Requirements also change quickly and what might be deemed possible for today's structure may be less desirable in future, so flexibility as well as honesty is important.

This suggests that better expectation management probably needs to happen sooner rather than later in the career management process. This means tackling those difficult conversations about career ambitions openly and constructively. It's not easy – but ultimately it's better than the disillusionment that can kick in from obliquely comforting appraisal messages. Intimating that someone's trajectory to the top is on track when, frankly, there's not even a flicker near the blue touch-paper is hardly effective expectation management.

When it comes right down to it, many associates or senior associates (and their equivalents in accountancy and consulting practices) may not actually want to make the sacrifices that have to be made to get to the top of their profession. And this isn't gender specific. Consider this. Could some of your team be pursuing the partnership route because they believe it is expected of them? The corollary being that if they don't, it might reflect badly on them.

It's also a racing certainty that partnership constitutes the most visible option for those wishing to substantially increase their salary, status and professional reputation – though arguably not their quality of life.

The whole area of career management in professional services is fraught with challenges like these, for organisations and individuals alike. In some instances, career coaching can help both individuals and the firms they work for. It can be a powerful tool in helping to identify skills and development needs, goals and action plans, as well as how these goals "fit" with the overall reality of the situation.

This can be helpful in adjusting overly ambitious aspirations, or finding the incentive to work at a particular area, in order to become a stronger contender. Importantly, coaching can also help people to critically assess what they do (and don't) really want from life and their careers. In doing so, it's possible to identify what potential alternatives are available and the options open to achieving them.

This doesn't mean that the coach becomes the "expectation manager" or the source of feedback and review – that remains the responsibility of the firm.

Coaching is just one potential approach, which can increase self-awareness and help to establish some real clarity around what people want from work and whether that necessitates a "route to the top". However, it is not a panacea.

For many, partnership becomes the stated goal because they are told that it should be and there is no apparent alternative. This is currently the only way for recognising and rewarding the very highest levels of professional expertise – although in most cases it brings with it many other management disciplines that divert them from the nature or level of work that they most enjoy and that attracted them to the profession in the first place.

While it is unlikely that the cachet of partnership will ever fade – nor should it – there may be different ways to place a higher, more visible value on the people in the firm whose skills clearly lie in highly technical or specialist areas. Business development or leading teams may not be their forte, but acknowledging the valuable contribution they make to the firm in their area of expertise is an essential part of keeping them committed and motivated.

Addressing some of these issues may require a more creative and radical approach to organisational structures, roles and recognition and reward policies. The message is that in the intensifying battle for talent, those that think ahead will stay ahead.

Pat Tomlin is director of the troubleshooting, change management and organisational development consultancy Wildcat One

'Many associates may not actually want to make the sacrifices'

The Herald, Monday 27 November 2006