



Getting the Most out of Support Staff

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Law increasingly invest considerable time and money in recruiting in-house marketing, human resources, finance and IT professionals (hereafter called 'in-house professionals'. The Anglo-Saxons firms started this many years ago, the European firms followed suit, slowly but steadily. Today, most European firms of a certain size have such in-house professionals.

However, turnover rates are high among such in-house professionals (the Legal Marketing Association, grouping US in-house marketing professionals, put the tenure track at between one and two years for marketing professionals). This is a major problem since it takes one to two years before an in-house professional can really start adding value. Many law firms loose a lot of time, money and opportunities because they have to replace professionals too fast. The return on investment on in-house professionals is, in many firms, far too low.

Danger: Mission Impossible Leads to Desertion

One of the most important reasons why in-house professionals abandon is that they are put before a 'Mission Impossible', especially in law firms where the concept of management is relatively new and where they are just starting to establish management structures and a management culture.

Many of these newly recruited staff members are confronted with an almost impossible mission. On the one hand, continental European lawyers often have expectations that are unrealistically high. They take the English firms as a benchmark and they expect staff to deliver immediately the same breadth and quality of services delivered by their counterparts in UK firms, thereby forgetting that English law firms often have huge teams to deliver these services and that it took them more than 15 years to build up their current management processes and culture.

On the other hand, continental European firms often have very limited experience or culture managing staff: there is no support, no coaching, no respect, no governance structure, no clear objective and, often, not even a decent function description.

The result: a negative cycle. Bursting with energy and eagerness to show their added value, newly recruited in-house professionals jump on every need or question raised by a lawyer. By that time, and without realising it, they become victims of the flat and often chaotic hierarchical structure of law firms:

- They don't receive clear answers on the questions they rightfully ask on 'strategy', 'priorities', 'goals', 'values', 'plans' etc.;
- They will rapidly receive all the operational tasks billable-focused lawyers are eager to delegate ("Let's have them do something useful in return for the high cost.");
- To please as many lawyers as possible and faced with no alternative due to a lack of strategic knowledge of the sector, they concentrate on the production of –quick win-deliverables (brochures, seminars, evaluation forms ...).

Overwhelmed with operational demands and no means to prioritise or structure them, they end up experiencing a negative cycle: the more they please lawyers doing whatever they are asked to do, the more they lose respect as they are seen as merely 'operational' and 'not strategic', the lower their chances to really add value to the firm.

Without the proper focus, coaching, support and protection, in-house professionals are doomed to fail to meet expectations. The result is frustration, both with lawyers and in-house professionals, and a high failure rate.

Hereafter, we provide some advice on how to prevent this.

How to Jump Start an In-house Management Function?

We have defined eight recommendations to jump start an in-house management function. The most important one is the first one since it will strongly influence the seven others.

1. Establish Direct Reporting Lines With an Authoritative Partner

The in-house professional needs a partner to report to. This can be the managing partner or the partner responsible for a specific management domain ('marketing partner', 'HR partner', 'Finance Partner'). It's very important that this partner:

- Is available for the in-house professional;
- Meets with the in-house professional on a regular basis (at least monthly);
- Makes clear agreements on the collaboration and the involvement of the partner.

The role of this partner is absolutely crucial. The success of the in-house professional will very much rely on the support, protection and coaching he or she receives from this partner. It's therefore important that these partners are sufficiently authoritative and experienced to support and coach the in-house professional.

Moreover, this partner:

- Is actively involved in establishing an action plan and prioritisation of tasks;
- Ensures focus on the long term and the establishment of a management infrastructure;
- Protects and backs the in-house professional and helps him to say 'no';
- Actively promotes the function and builds the credibility of the in-house professional;
- Feeds the in-house professional with information;
- Ensures the in-house professional has the opportunity to interact with the legal market;
- Avoids that the in-house professional operates in isolation from the lawyers.

We will clarify each of these hereafter.

2. *Define Priorities in an Action Plan*

It's absolutely crucial to limit the scope of activities of the in-house professional to a realistic level, certainly in the beginning. What are the priorities and what are not? It's important to structure priorities in a formal action plan (marketing plan, HR plan, finance plan...). Make sure the plan is communicated internally and respected by all lawyers.

3. *Focus on Establishing Management Structures for the Long Term*

Make sure the in-house professional invests sufficient time in building processes and structures: databases, training programs, policies, scripts etc. To please as many lawyers as possible the danger is very high that the in-house professional concentrates too much on operational tasks and quick-wins and that he will be snowed under by them. The day the in-house professional leaves the firm because he's frustrated with the operational side of his job, the firm will have to start from scratch with a new in-house professional.

4. *Ensure Protection*

The in-house professional is very vulnerable. He (or she) is not bringing in fees directly, he's hierarchal impact on partners or even associates, and he's not familiar with every specialty... Occasionally, the in-house professional will fail to meet expectations. It's an inevitable aspect of making progress. At those occasions, it's the responsibility of senior partners to back the in-house professional's decisions and to stand up for him if necessary. This is especially important during the first two years. Without protection the in-house professional will gradually lose impact.

5. *Support the Credibility of the Function*

The more credibility the in-house professional has, the more impact he can have. The firm should carefully think about ways to reinforce the in-house professional's credibility. For example:

- Invite the in-house professional to attend important meetings such as partner meetings, at least for the topics that are related to his management domain;
- Stimulate the in-house professional to communicate successes and achievements;
- Give the in-house professional visibility by letting him give presentations;
- Give credit to the in-house professional for achievements by complimenting him before all partners/lawyers;

6. *Provide Information*

An in-house professional is helpless without information. An in-house professional that has a lot of information will create opportunities. Make sure the in-house professional has access to crucial information: meeting reports, client and contact lists, new matters lists, information on competitors, financial information etc.

7. *Drench the In-house professional into the Legal Market*

Many in-house professionals have no legal backgrounds. Yet, to be effective, they need to understand the products, the market and the clients. Make sure that the in-house professional has sufficient opportunities to get to know the legal market. For example:

- Invite him to attend practice group meetings or internal legal training sessions;
- Take him to bar events, conferences and client events;
- Stimulate partners to take the time to explain their practice to the in-house professional;

8. *No Outsourcing to the In-house professional*

A very common mistake is to 'outsource' to the in-house professional, resulting in the in-house professional working in isolation from lawyers and resulting in poor service by the in-house professional.

The role of the in-house professional is to support lawyers. The in-house professional cannot replace lawyers and he can't deliver quality work without their input and involvement. Anything the in-house professional does must be done in close cooperation with lawyers. Lawyers must understand that they need to continue to invest time and effort in management. ■

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