

WHAT'S KEEPING MANAGING PARTNERS UP AT NIGHT?

FIVE MANAGING PARTNERS TO RESPOND AT PDI

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What is keeping our law firm managing partners up at night? Managing partners from five national law firms will address exactly that question at a plenary entitled “A Candid Conversation: PD from a Managing Partner’s Perspective” during the 2009 Professional Development Institute (PDI) on December 3-4 in Washington, DC.

The agenda for this year’s PDI, sponsored by NALP and ALI-ABA in collaboration with the Professional Development Consortium, is teeming with programs both topical and instructive, and the unprecedented changes to the legal profession due to the economic downturn will provide an undercurrent for many of this year’s offerings. The “Candid Conversation” plenary is a particularly exciting opportunity to hear first-hand what five MPs think are the most important challenges facing firms today – and what roles they think PD professionals can play in supporting efforts to meet those challenges.

We spoke with two of the panelists, Susan Brewer, CEO and Managing Partner at Steptoe & Johnson PLLC, and Bob Jewell, Managing Partner at Andrews Kurth LLP, about the upcoming plenary panel and some of the topics they plan to cover.

Like many law firm managing partners, Susan Brewer feels that one of the great challenges facing Steptoe & Johnson in today’s economy is how to “get the most out of every single employee.” Brewer calls it an “exercise in motivation.” According to Brewer, Steptoe’s

Professional Development Department, led by Director Michele Bendekovic, plays a major role in supporting that effort as they try to make sure new attorneys are working at their highest level as soon as possible. Accordingly, Brewer thinks it critical that firms train attorneys and staff members earlier than has historically been the case to contribute to the “team effort” and that firms help their attorneys identify other talents they can bring to their organization, such as business development or mentoring skills.

Bob Jewell shared that one of his chief concerns is, not surprisingly, “the uncertain economy” and all the implications of managing a law firm during these times, including the importance of lawyers not having too narrow a legal skill set. “Those attorneys who are able to stay busy during tough times are the ones who are able to demonstrate multiple skills rather than limited ones.” This is a dilemma PD departments can help solve. “PD can clearly be involved in helping attorneys solve the problem of having too narrow a skills set,” Jewell noted. “The by-product of [PD/attorney collaboration efforts] is demonstrating to the client and their law firm that the young lawyer is able to provide value in a number of different ways.”

Additionally, Jewell devotes time to thinking about today’s rapidly evolving methods of communication and the prevalence of such things as Facebook usage by newer generations in the legal workplace. “We’ve watched Twitter explode on the scene of social networking, and people haven’t even started to think through

the legal implications of communicating in these forums,” said Jewell. “What we have to avoid is diminishing the importance of face-to-face communication as people are more and more frequently doing their networking through one of the many online venues.”

Of course, identifying cost savings is also on the minds of managing partners these days, and in-house PD departments play a critical role in finding unique ways to streamline services without jeopardizing their quality or value. Susan Brewer thinks that new technology provides possible solutions, as well as streamlining professional development offerings to minimize the time lawyers must take away from their commercial work. She believes that efforts by her firm’s PD department to standardize training programs and harness technology to offer a video library of programs has had an immediate impact on reducing the cost of attorney participation. Brewer reasons that “attorneys are more willing to participate [in PD efforts] when their time investment is streamlined.”

Similarly, Jewell noted that clients are demanding more and more efficiency in the delivery of legal services and that these client demands will change the 40-year-old model of the billable hour. “I think this will be a good development for firms that can deliver value in more efficient ways – and they will get paid for doing so,” said Jewell, “while the more inefficient firms won’t get the same return. This directly relates to trying to anticipate what our clients will be demanding and translating that into our hiring strategy and needs.”

When asked directly, “What do managing partners see as the role of PD?” Jewell was quick to reply, “PD professionals also help with boosting attorney morale – another important role the PD personnel play within firms right now. They act as calming influences because the attorneys don’t necessarily have the experience base to recognize that it’s not always going to be this way, and they need a guiding, steady hand during these uncertain and angst-ridden times.”

Jewell's firm has a Professional Development Department led by Director Amy Sladczyk Hancock (co-author of this article), and he states that it "helps identify opportunities to enhance the professional development of ALL of our attorneys – so much more than just via CLE programming. PD is all across the board."

Jewell's last words of wisdom were words you may want to share with your own managing partner on the role of PD in firms today: "Never underestimate how important the counseling aspect of PD work is right now." Jewell feels that the ability of PD professionals to direct lawyers on how to keep busy during downtime and how to directly invest in their

own careers is crucial to maintaining morale in a lagging economy.

"A Candid Conversation" is one of many programs at PDI 2009 that will explore best practices related to such new challenges and initiatives as the integration of deferred associates, new models for talent management, and the shift from lockstep to competency-based reward and advancement systems. At the same time, the conference will provide the quality core programming that in-house PD professionals have come to expect, including programs on training, diversity, leadership, career development, and professional development for PD professionals.

Please plan to attend and expect to go back to your firms with written tools and take-aways to use in your own in-house PD departments. For more information or to register, go to www.nalp.org and click on "Conferences & Events." ■

