

UK 2nd edition

# The Future of Legal Services: Expert Analysis

EDITED BY HELEN ROCHE



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## **The Future of Legal Services: Expert Analysis UK 2nd edition**

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### **UK/EUROPE OFFICE**

Ark Conferences Ltd  
Paulton House  
8 Shepherdess Walk  
London N1 7LB  
United Kingdom  
Tel +44 (0)207 549 2500  
Fax +44 (0)20 7324 2373  
[publishing@ark-group.com](mailto:publishing@ark-group.com)

### **NORTH AMERICA OFFICE**

Ark Group Inc  
4408 N. Rockwood Drive  
Suite 150  
Peoria IL 61614  
United States  
Tel +1 309 495 2853  
Fax +1 309 495 2858  
[publishingna@ark-group.com](mailto:publishingna@ark-group.com)

### **ASIA/PACIFIC OFFICE**

Ark Group Australia Pty Ltd  
Main Level  
83 Walker Street  
North Sydney NSW 2060  
Australia  
Tel +61 1300 550 662  
Fax +61 1300 550 663  
[aga@arkgroupasia.com](mailto:aga@arkgroupasia.com)

Online bookshop  
[www.ark-group.com/bookshop](http://www.ark-group.com/bookshop)

Reports Commissioning Editor  
Helen Roche  
[hroche@ark-group.com](mailto:hroche@ark-group.com)

Reports Publisher – International  
Fiona Tucker  
[ftucker@ark-group.com](mailto:ftucker@ark-group.com)

UK/Europe marketing enquiries  
Robyn Macé  
[rmace@ark-group.com](mailto:rmace@ark-group.com)

US marketing enquiries  
Daniel Smallwood  
[dsmallwood@ark-group.com](mailto:dsmallwood@ark-group.com)

Asia/Pacific marketing enquiries  
Steve Oesterreich  
[aga@arkgroupasia.com](mailto:aga@arkgroupasia.com)

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## About the authors

**Chris Bradish** is an associate at Maurice Turnor Gardner LLP and part of the professional practices group. He advises on partnerships, limited partnerships and LLPs, and has experience of advising on regulatory and governance issues. He has particular experience in advising on partnership disputes in the context of partner moves. Chris is a member of the Association of Partnership Practitioners.

**Toby Brown** is the director of strategic pricing & analytics at Akin Gump LLP. In this role Toby works with firm partners and clients in developing pricing arrangements and service delivery models that drive successful relationships. Prior to this, Toby served in similar roles for both Vinson & Elkins LLP and Fulbright & Jaworski LLP, where he also drove knowledge management (KM) initiatives and various marketing efforts. Before joining Fulbright, Toby served as the Communications Director for the Utah State Bar. In his tenure with the Bar, he also served as the CLE, Access to Justice and Programs Director. Toby presents nationally on legal technology, marketing, and law firm management and has served on a number of legal services boards, bar association task forces, and legal market organisations. He received the Peer Excellence Award, the President's Award and the Anne Charles Award from the National Association of Bar Executives. Toby maintains the ABA award-winning *3 Geeks and a Law Blog* with two colleagues.

**Rachel Brushfield** is director of EnergiseLegal and Energise, The Talent Liberation Company, and is a 'talent liberator' – a career, talent, and learning strategist. Her career heritage is originally in marketing, brand strategy, and communication for design, advertising, and innovation consultancies, and she is a certified NLP coach and facilitator in action learning sets (group coaching). Rachel is the author of two Ark Group reports, *Talent Management for Lawyers* (2012) and *Professional Development for Lawyers* (2012), and of over 18 articles, with topics including: life after managing partner, emotional intelligence, and personal branding. Rachel has done two events for the Association of Women Solicitors (AWS) London group – 'Personal branding and social media' and 'Marketing yourself' – as well as many for various associations about self-promotion, talent management and employee engagement.

**Charles Christian** is a barrister and Reuters correspondent turned award-winning technology journalist, newsletter publisher, blogger, new media maven, sometime poet, science-fiction author, and keynote speaker. He is the founder, publisher, and editor-in-chief of the *Legal Technology Insider* series of newsletters, websites, apps, events, and information services. He is invited to speak at conferences nationally and internationally on future trends in technology, knowledge management, media and marketing.



**Kevin Colangelo** is a veteran lawyer, legal services innovator, and client relationship strategist. In his role as managing partner at Yuson & Irvine LLC, Kevin is responsible for guiding and implementing the firm's mission of combining world-class lawyers with disciplined matter management, and leading tools and technologies, for the benefit of their clients' legal, sourcing and compliance teams. An entrepreneur and core member of the leadership team at legal outsourcing pioneer, *Pangea3* (acquired by Thomson Reuters in 2010), Kevin developed and implemented many of the fundamental workflow principles and operating procedures that have become standard practice across the legal outsourcing industry. Kevin has also held leadership positions at two Am Law 100 firms and was a co-founder and leader of the Outsourcing and Technology Transactions practice at Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel in New York.

**David Ferri** is head of legal for PayPal, one of the world's leading payment companies, for the Europe, Middle East and Africa region, based at PayPal's European headquarters in Luxembourg. As a senior payments lawyer, he has worked in the financial services sector for many years, previously serving as VP chief legal counsel for MoneyGram International with responsibility for the EMEA and Asia Pacific regions. David previously worked as a corporate lawyer in the financial services sector at international law firm Norton Rose LLP in their London, Milan, and Bahrain offices, and is qualified in England and New York.

**Mark Gould** is the head of knowledge management at Addleshaw Goddard LLP. Prior to taking on the role in 2006, he was a PSL in the firm's competition group. Mark joined the firm in 2001, changing his career path in the process; he had previously spent 13 years teaching law at the University of Bristol.

**Alex Hamilton** is a founder and principal at Radiant Law, a new type of law firm built from the ground-up to improve the client experience. He advises clients on outsourcing and technology transactions, including off-shoring, business process, and assisted transformation outsourcing. Alex has led a number of projects that have been recognised by the FT Innovative Lawyer Awards and was shortlisted for the FT 2010 Innovative Lawyer of the Year award.

**Andrew Hedley** is director at Hedley Consulting and advises law firm leaders on issues of vision, strategy, and change. Alongside project engagements, he is a sought after strategy group guide, partner retreat speaker, workshop facilitator and coach. He is the author of two Ark Group reports, *Developing Strategic Client Relationships* (2008) and *Client Strategy in a Changing Legal Market* (2011), as well as being a member of the editorial board and contributing regularly to *Managing Partner* magazine.

**Sol Irvine** is a partner, and one of the founders of Yuson & Irvine LLC. Prior to founding Yuson & Irvine Sol was a member of the outsourcing, emerging business, and technology groups at Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP and Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP. Sol brings deep technical knowledge to legal issues in enterprise technology purchasing, outsourcing, web and mobile services, and privacy and data protection laws. As trusted counsel for many leading companies, Yuson & Irvine develops data-driven approaches to the commercial contracting process.

**Manju Jessa** is a member of the RBC General Counsel's Group as senior counsel and head of the International Wealth Management legal team. Manju is qualified to practice both in the UK and Ontario, Canada and has worked in private practice and in-house in both countries. Manju was named one of the Lexpert Rising Stars, which is an award for a select number of Canada's best lawyers under the age of 40. This award together with the In-House Counsel of the Year Award in 2012 recognised Manju for her achievements in leading her team of senior counsel and contributing individually to helping her business partners around the world receive high quality, timely, cost effective, and innovative legal services. Manju is a leader in the General Counsel Group's diversity initiatives, actively supporting pro bono work and mentoring interns, students, and junior lawyers. For this, Manju accepted the 2011 Lexpert Zenith Awards for Diversity action by in-house department and has been featured in magazines including the Women of Influence and a panel speaker.

**Mike Jones** is the founding director of IV League Talent Limited. He created the IV League concept to offer law firms an entirely new way of attracting top legal talent, but also to offer senior lawyers a different career opportunity. In addition, Mike is founder of Intrinsic Values Limited, a consultancy that partners with professional services organisations to leverage business development opportunities. Prior to this, Mike enjoyed a successful career of over 20 years in financial and professional services, holding senior sales and marketing roles with several leading organisations including Ernst & Young, St James's Place Capital, Tite & Lewis and Zurich Financial Services. Mike was the first sales director appointed by a law firm and since then he has built a reputation as one of the most influential business development consultants in the professional services sector.

**Rick A. Kathuria** is a professional engineer (PENG), a certified management consultant (CMC) and a certified project management professional (PMP) with over 15 years of experience working on large international projects at top tier consulting firms. He serves in a leadership role in operating the Project Management Institute's 'Legal Project Management Community of Practice'. Rick is the director of the project and vendor management office at McCarthy Tétrault LLP. In this role he is responsible for overseeing major project initiatives for the firm and external vendor management. In one of his projects he was the project manager working with senior partners to develop project management training for all their lawyers, which included the design and build of the tools for the firm's successful Legal Project Management initiative. He personally delivered training to lawyers and provided ongoing coaching to help effectively project manage various legal mandates. Rick is co-author of *Ark Group's Project Management for Lawyers* (2011).

**Rachel Khiara** is a partner at Khiara Law LLP. She is recognised as a pre-eminent advisor in the professional practices sector, working with leading and niche firms and new entrants into the legal services sector. Rachel has a particular specialisation for regulatory and compliance work, and sat on the Solicitors Regulation Authority's ABS/OFR Committee. She established Khiara Law LLP in December 2011, the first boutique law firm to specialise exclusively in advising legal services businesses. Services provided by Khiara Law LLP include regulatory work, restructuring advice, dealing with constitutional issues (including profit sharing arrangements), legal business outsourcing and in-house training. Prior to founding Khiara Law LLP, Rachel Khiara was a partner at Addleshaw Goddard LLP and counsel at Allen & Overy LLP.

**Tony Reiss** has more than 20 years of experience in professional services as a fee earner, business support professional, consultant, and coach. His current work is mostly with law firm partners and senior business support professionals in leadership, business development, and consulting. He designs and facilitates retreats and workshops for partnerships or management teams on identifying strategic objectives and tackling implementation issues. He is the winner of the LETG Award for Best Law Firm Trainer and author of *The BD Handbook for Lawyers: Prospects to Advocates*. Tony started his career in brand management with P&G before joining Deloitte as a management consultant leading change projects for BBC, BP, BT, International Stock Exchange, Prudential, Rank, Shell, and the United Nations. He was BD director at the international law firm CMS Cameron McKenna before setting up Sherwood PSF Consulting in 1999.

**Peter Scott** is a solicitor and for eight years (until 2000) was the managing partner of Eversheds LLP's London and European offices. He acts as an advisor, trainer, and coach to many law firms in the UK and abroad in relation to their financial, strategic, performance, compliance, and business development issues, with particular focus on helping clients to improve their competitiveness through effective performance management. Peter is editor of the *Practice Management Handbook* and a member of the editorial board of the *Legal Compliance Bulletin* published by the Law Society. He is a frequent speaker at conferences for lawyers and other professionals, and his articles are published in a number of well-known legal and other professional journals. He is a consultant with Penningtons Solicitors LLP where he is a member of the firm's Professional Practices Group.

**Corinne Staves** is a senior associate at Maurice Turnor Gardner LLP. She advises on partnerships, limited partnerships and LLPs in relation to their use as professional practices, fund managers, and family wealth planning vehicles. In the professional services firm market, she advises on partner moves, regulation, and governance and transactions (such as forming new businesses, restructurings, mergers, and LLP conversions). Corinne is a member of the Committee of the Association of Partnership Practitioners.

**Richard Turnor** is a partner and leads the professional practices group at Maurice Turnor Gardner LLP. He advises professional practices and their partners on their constitutional documents, international structure, mergers, demergers, SRA regulation, governance, and internal disputes. He was a partner at Allen & Overy LLP from 1985 until 2009. He is a former chairman of the Association of Partnership Practitioners and a non-executive director of the Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust.

**Richard Wyatt** is a chartered accountant and a highly experienced law firm consultant. He has spent nearly 30 years advising on accounting, management, and strategy issues for law firms. He spent seven years as the finance director of a medium-sized regional law firm, during which he became fully exposed to the practical and emotional issues that influence how law firms behave. He formed Cambridge Blue Square Management Ltd. (a management consultancy firm specialising in work for law firms) in July 2011 and has recently spoken at a number of conferences and seminars on law firm management, including at the Law Society's Law Management Section's Finance and Business Conference, and he regularly presents the finance section in the Law Society's Management 1 Course for post-qualified lawyers.

# Expert analysis 11: The rise of the employee value proposition

*By Rachel Brushfield, director of EnergiseLegal and Energise, The Talent Liberation Company*

THIS ARTICLE explores the employee value proposition; what it means in the changing legal market, why it is important, what internal and external factors affect it, and how it is a tool to attract and retain the best talent.

Major trends affecting the legal market include increased competition, increased specialisms, the spotlight on client relationship management, the commoditisation of certain types of law, mergers, increasing price transparency and fixed pricing, and law firms focusing on efficiency, and needing to achieve more with less. There are also a surplus of lawyers for the number of jobs available, and less partner places and equity rewards to share. These trends increase the need for law firms to have the right people in place to attract the clients they want and to build the firm's reputation, and for these people to work efficiently and effectively.

Firms need their employees to willingly give more than they are contracted to. That is, they need lawyers to commit discretionary effort as a result of feeling motivated and engaged by how they are treated, and with the prospects they see for themselves in future in the firm. The employee value proposition (EVP) as part of the overall talent management strategy is therefore a strategic imperative.

The EVP is what the employee gets from working at a particular firm. It is a combination of their employment contract; how much they are paid, benefits such as pension and perks, and facilities at their disposal like canteen and car park space. However it is also the psychological contract, hard to pin down and measure but vitally crucial to influence and manage, that ultimately affects the firm's profitability and client experience. The psychological contract is about how people feel at work. This is affected by a multitude of factors: the environment in which they work; how they are treated; the extent to which their values are honoured; how motivated they feel by the work they are given and the responsibilities assigned to them; and the quality and quantity of the management and development received by them. The EVP needs to articulate 'the deal' for all staff and should include the firm's approach to career development, rewards, support, and the way the culture of the firm plays out in practice – i.e. the employee experience. 'The EVP needs to be informed by what existing staff think. It is likely to be different for associates and partners' according to Melinda Wallman, partner at Major, Lindsey & Africa.

Many firms have their values on their websites but their actions and behaviour do not match up to them or there is inconsistency across the firm. For younger lawyers especially, and to attract quality

lateral hires, firms need to 'live their brands'. The employer brand is what will attract talented individuals to want to work for the firm. 'A clearly articulated employee value proposition can be of great assistance in the "attraction" part of the talent management strategy', according to Charlie Keeling, global HR director at Clyde & Co. Perceptions about the firm and the EVP and employee experience is what will make them want to stay and create good word of mouth via social media – therefore feeding back into the employer brand. In the words of Charlie Keeling: 'The employer brand needs to be high level and deal with what the firm stands for, e.g. strategy with specialist sector focus, strong branding, robust performance, and the employee proposition should then define things through the eyes of the employee, e.g. interesting and challenging work, a performance – not time – served approach to rewards, individual benefits, supportive culture with mentoring etc.' At the same time, the employer brand can be hugely affected by employees and the firm's EVP. 'It is impossible to have an authentic employer brand without understanding and defining clearly what the employee value proposition really is', according to Stephanie Abbott (director of knowledge, learning and development at Mayer Brown JSM).

### **How important is the employee value proposition and experience?**

In the changing legal market, the client is king. Increased competition has magnified the focus on client needs, customer relationship management, and how to create differentiation to win business and retain or attract clients. Firms think nothing of spending time on the client experience and how to influence and manage it, and the current law firm model relies even more so than in the past on efficiency – which

means senior lawyers making margin from the time and effort spent on client projects by more junior lawyers. Law firms sell the services of people, and therefore attracting, developing, and retaining quality people should be strategic priorities. Yet managing the employee value proposition does not receive sufficient time and attention considering the impact it has. As the legal market continues to globalise and segment, lateral movement of lawyers will increase between firms. A high proportion of lateral hires are unsuccessful, which costs firms a huge amount in wasted recruitment fees.

The 2012 Major, Lindsey & Africa lateral partner satisfaction survey<sup>1</sup> shows that compensation is one of the least important factors in a lateral's choice of a new firm. The most critical factor is the firm's ability to support the expansion of a lateral's practice. Melinda Wallman who is a partner at Major Lindsey & Africa commented: 'The best law firms in the world operate as one firm, which requires collaboration. When people have the same value and vision and when they are rewarded for working as a team, it results in a collaborative culture. That counts for a lot in a firm's EVP.'

'Platform' will become increasingly important to law firm partners who seek firms that differentiate themselves from others, e.g. by practice group strength, geographical focus, or client focus. 'Platform' is the springboard from which lawyers are able to do their work to a greater or lesser extent – how supported or inhibited they are by other lawyers, how much the firm is collaborative and collegiate in reality, or divisive and competitive. The employee experience is about personal job satisfaction and career fulfilment and younger lawyers will vote with their feet if they do not get it. Talent drain is a huge waste of time, money, and knowledge, and one that firms can ill afford.

Speaking on this topic, Stephanie Abbott said: 'In law firms, a lot of the employee value proposition is to do with culture, identity and peers. A sense of belonging and purpose is more important than rewards, which tend to be similar across the industry. This is often the unspoken differentiator – the quality of the work and people in a law firm.'

As a people business, not only is talent essential to a law firm's competitive advantage, people make up a huge cost (coming to, on estimation, over 40 per cent of total costs). In an increasingly commoditised market, where intellect and legal specialism are the keys to securing higher margin work from clients, talent is everything. In a people business like professional services, the employees are the crown jewels. Why then do law firms not treat them so? Many law firms see employees as expendable, and the churn of this precious commodity and the annual shedding of people is seen as part of the workings of a law firm to balance the books.

Law firms are a group of bright individualists working collectively in a structure of collaboration to a greater or lesser extent. Achieving integration can be a challenge as individual lawyers and practice groups, as well as partners with different tenure, have their own agendas. Each individual practice group has different talent needs and may be at a different place in the career lifecycle. Yet it is vital that the firm has a coherent strategy to talent and integrated people management policies. Discussing and agreeing anything people-related is time not spent fee earning and therefore is seen as a second priority. This can have a significant impact over time, but measures are not always in place to link back people metrics to business metrics, and results from

investment in people development can be longer than the annual business cycle.

The premium practice areas of a law firm are dependent on attracting and retaining the best legal brains, and they require a segmented strategy with different approaches for different segments. It is wise to manage and track the perceptions and fulfilment of employees, especially high potentials and talent seen as essential to deliver the firm's strategic plan. Different elements of the EVP can be adjusted so that employees work harder, are happier, give more of their effort, beyond their contractual hours, and act as a natural advert to attract future talent and enhance the firm's reputation. Often these cost little but take thought: sharing data; asking for opinions; involvement in decision making; exposure to senior management; a modern approach to flexible working and a focus on output.

In a group discussion initiated by this author on LinkedIn, it was asked: 'What one word best sums up how to engage employees effectively?' The words shared were: 'purpose', 'connection', 'impact', 'interaction', 'meaning', 'listen', 'dialogue', 'honesty', 'trust', 'empowerment', 'involvement', 'respect', 'ownership', 'transparency', and 'recognition'. How many law firms have a strategy for making this happen through the EVP in reality and track it over time? The employee value proposition is the responsibility of everyone in a firm; the firm's leadership, the partners, learning and development, organisational development, human resources and marketing, but what gets measured gets done. How many firms track the employee journey and the perceptions that are created from what happens or does not happen? Is the law firm model fit for purpose to create happy and motivated employees? Is it a structure which creates engagement, promotes initiative and

proactive endeavour which benefits clients and motivates employees? A firm's leader is critical to the employee proposition being delivered in reality.

Now, more than ever, law firms need to manage their employees and carefully handle the psychological contract, and yet few firms make it a priority, have an individual responsible for it and create an integrated strategy to influence it. The client experience is what clients feel as a result of all their interactions with the firm and the client proposition is why they choose firm A over firm B. The employee experience is no different. Law firms need to think about what territory they want to occupy in the hearts and minds of their employees and how they can create these perceptions.

Many firms do 'knee jerk' reactions to the supply and demand of lawyers, rather than approaching talent management and the role of the EVP within it strategically. Firms pursue profit to attract and develop the best talent but sometimes need to compromise their talent management strategy to maintain profit levels, e.g. having to respond to rapidly changing market conditions by restructuring and retrenching staff. How people are treated when being asked to leave can have a huge impact on the collective psychological contract and word of mouth, and negative comments can spread virally within minutes via social media, undoing years of carefully planned and orchestrated work to create a fine employer brand. Witnessing others being fairly treated can have a big impact on the employee experience and so how individuals are treated when made redundant can stay a long time in people's memories. This is something to bear in mind in the tough times ahead for law firms in the UK. As well as this, the alumni of a firm can be a rich source of future business and referrals,

and so decisions about the EVP, employee experience, and the psychological contract can have a long term impact on client business and profit.

Most employees primary experience the psychological contract through their individual supervising partner who, feeling pressured to fee earn, often do not make people management a priority, because of short-term thinking created by the law firm model. Six minutes of attention with a partner's mind on client work does not motivate and engage an associate who is hungry for learning and development and fearful of the future. Postponing individual supervision and not making an annual performance appraisal a priority creates bruises on the psychological contract.

### **The world of work is changing**

What people want from work is changing. The beliefs and values of the various generations of lawyers are very different. The financial rewards for years of toil and hard work are not as compelling as they used to be, if they are there at all. And yet, the efforts of lawyers, and the hours they put in are an essential ingredient on which law firms' success depends. Younger lawyers, Generation Y and the Millennials seek more variety, more responsibility, and involvement in decision making. They expect a law firm to develop them and demonstrate its values. They are less loyal than their predecessors and they do not want a job for life, but a satisfying and rewarding job for now. This is a paradigm shift in thinking. In future, law graduates may choose the law firms, not the other way round.

Lucian Tarnowski, founder of Brave New Talent (a social platform of online talent communities where organisations

and people connect, communicate, and collaborate around relevant professional topics), sees a real need for employers to focus on the EVP and improve their image using technology: 'There is a mismatch between the "old school" sophistication of technology in work that employers use and what employees adopt in their personal lives, the "new school". This can disengage employees pre-employment and law firms need to make more time to develop the candidate experience on-line to attract the best legal talent to them.'

The future 'super league' of truly global firms servicing the best multinational clients will be competing for the best legal brains. These firms will need to take the EVP to a whole new level to ensure that they attract and keep the best legal talent, and therefore attract and keep the best clients. Best practice professional development will evolve into creating the *crème de la crème* of training to attract and develop the best lawyers.

More and more employees want something more or different from what traditional law firms provide – and not just the younger generations discussed above. As someone involved in career change work with individuals, I have seen first-hand a consistently growing trend for talented individuals to choose to leave large bureaucratic organisations to pursue a portfolio career, to set up their own business, or to change direction completely. Career structures in law firms are out-of-date and need to change. Failure to adapt will mean that the legal profession does not attract the talent it needs.

It is impossible to give all employees a unique EVP tailored to their own needs, wants, values and motivations, and therefore talent needs to be segmented, but financially in the current market – with lean HR/L&D teams – this is not realistic. Lawyers do not like being open with their peers and do not relish difficult

conversations of this nature. Singling someone out can be divisive regarding the partnership track and officially law firms want everyone to be seen to be treated equally. Professional development is becoming more selective and rewards more targeted – performance based, not time served.

The legal profession is traditional, hierarchical and often bureaucratic with a clear pecking order of responsibility which demotivates more junior lawyers hungry for it. Many firms do an employee engagement or satisfaction survey to measure how employees are feeling. To what extent this data feeds directly back into developing the EVP and into creating a healthier psychological contract is debatable. Often this is because the EVP and psychological contract are multifaceted concepts affected by a multitude of factors and no one person is responsible.

The law firm model is out of date and no longer fit for purpose. There is a danger that the best talent needed to secure a firm's competitive advantage will be put off by the rewards tomorrow strategy, the long hours, hierarchical and bureaucratic structure, and will choose a different career.

At some point in the future, when the economic cautionary fog of the downturn lifts, the shoe will be on the other foot – the employee will hold the ace card. The smart firms will take steps now to ensure that they have a strong and healthy psychological contract and robust EVP and employee experience. They will ensure their talent management strategy is up to date, with rewards and culture that meet the needs and desires of tomorrow's lawyers, not yesterdays. Failure to do this now will result in talent drain, just at a time when firms need their existing talent to step up to create new growth. Firms need the next generation of talent to choose their firm and be the leaders and rainmakers of the future.



### Case study – Latham & Watkins

Global law firm Latham & Watkins is a great example of the employee proposition at work and its role in engagement as well as attracting, developing, and retaining the best legal talent. The firm employs more than 2,000 lawyers across 31 offices around the world and its gross revenue was more than £1.35 billion in 2011. Latham & Watkins is known for its committee-driven management structure and empowering associates at an earlier stage of PQE than the average firm.

Generation Y, born 1980 to 1999, and the Millennials, born after 2000, are hungry to develop and grow, to get involved in projects and decision-making. Associates in a law firm now often fit within the Generation Y and Millennial generations. For over thirty years, Latham & Watkins has had a policy of involving associates in management decision-making through its extensive committee system. Latham & Watkins set up its Associates Committee in 1970, which was ground-breaking at the time and remains a key differentiator for the firm. This initiative was started by the managing partner at the time, Clint Stevenson.

The Associates Committee contributes to decisions on strategy, remuneration, and recruitment, and comprises 25 partners and 25 associates, with the mix being representative of the geographical spread of the firm's offices. The Associates Committee makes recommendations to the Executive Committee on partner promotions, policies affecting associates and associate compensation, including bonuses.

An associate's role participating on any of the committees takes time and includes acting as a sounding board for fellow associates, whilst needing to maintain a profitable practice. Initiatives that have occurred as a result of the Associates Committee's decisions include the firm's PRO-RATA program, which gives associates returning from parental leave an option to work a reduced pace schedule for six months without seeking prior approval.

Involvement in the firm's broad committees system provides associates with manifold 'hands on' training and career growth opportunities, as well as greater responsibility and practical experience in the management of the firm. Responsibilities such as evaluating business cases give associates significant accountability and input which motivates them. There are also associates on the firm's diversity, ethics, pro bono, recruiting, technology, and training and career enhancement committees, among others.

Latham & Watkins believe that its structure and inclusive approach leads to lower attrition, supports the firm's efforts to recruit high quality associates who are united by a shared collegial spirit and team ethos and who are engaged in the growth of the firm. The firm's policy of involving associates in decision-making acts as a powerful recruiting strategy for the best legal talent. It also helps to build the firm's brand as an employer who values diverse views and fosters an inclusive environment.

Many firms do not share Latham & Watkins' openness with information and commitment to a transparent decision-making culture. The firm's committee system embodies these values and helps associates see how their role and contribution fits within the overall strategy.

### References

1. See: [www.mlaglobal.com/community/thought-leadership/lateral-partner-sati/02dc05ea-b842-b69f-e7ff-ffd63a79ea90](http://www.mlaglobal.com/community/thought-leadership/lateral-partner-sati/02dc05ea-b842-b69f-e7ff-ffd63a79ea90).