

How Associate Life Has Evolved Over The Past Decade

By **Brad Kaufman** (January 16, 2020, 3:20 PM EST)

It seems that 2010 was not that long ago. I vividly remember the great recession and the impact it made on the legal industry over the last decade. The business side of the practice of law has become more competitive and transparent as clients, faced with their own pressures, asked for more information about fees, use of technology, staffing ratios and a host of other things.

Clients needed alternatives to it all and expected efficiency and innovation more than ever. Lawyers were asked to do more in less time and at a lower cost. For new associates entering the legal profession, they needed to be practice-ready much more quickly. This meant that associates needed to be able to work with new and ever-changing technologies as well as meet the traditional demands placed on associates. The need to embrace change was also fundamental for law firms, and that change impacted associate life in many different ways.



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In my dual role as co-president and global chairman of professional development and integration for Greenberg Traurig LLP, I work closely with associates daily on development plans, goal setting, assimilation and workflow. Following are some of the ways I have witnessed associate life change over the past 10 years, most, but not all, for the better.

Legal Work

Associates are doing less commoditized work due to client billing arrangements and because of different staffing models, upskilled legal support staff and the emergence of artificial intelligence programs that can perform cite checking, various aspects of document production and even brief writing.

An associate's time, then, is spent on more sophisticated tasks. This translates to greater efficiency of the work force and in turn, value to the client. Legal project management, offering a more methodical and structured approach, allows associates more efficiently to work on substantive legal matters.

Technology

Legal technology has become a competitive edge critical in today's market. Lawyers have a professional responsibility to be efficient and proficient when working on legal matters for clients. Associates have an obligation to understand and leverage the technology tools within their firm. This trend is here to stay

with associates playing an important role as early adopters, creators and influencers for legal technology.

Work/Life Balance

Face time still has great value. However, due to the benefits of technology, a person can work anywhere at any time. To attract and retain top associate talent, firms have begun to offer more flexibility in work schedules, allowing associates to focus more time on the results of their legal work than on where they do it.

In addition, embodying this mindset through firm policies or programs provides associates with opportunities to have more freedom over their personal lives. Awareness of lawyer well-being — physical and mental health — and subsequent support is an important trend that has emerged over the last several years.

Talent

A law firm's greatest asset is its people, especially those legal minds that help differentiate firms in the legal market. To get a jump on the legal talent, attracting and hiring law school students for summer programs, as well as giving offers to first-year associates or hiring lateral associates, can be extremely competitive. Associates more than ever need to understand the value proposition that each firm offers to find the right fit. Associates today reflect more on their fit with their firm and are increasingly more agile in switching firms if the current one is not meeting their needs.

Career Progression

Associates seem to be more aware and accepting of alternative career options than in the past. The road to partnership is important to many, but, as associates practice, they are quicker to reflect on their personal journeys and what is important to them.

The current generation of associates is also more confident. They have a desire for accelerated career progression and recognition. Due to these factors, associates may take many alternative paths within the law firm setting, such as project or practice attorney or leadership business staff roles.

Globalization

Over the last 10 years, there has been an acceleration of large firms expanding their global reach to better serve clients, whether they are based in the United States, Europe or Asia. Many top-tier firms are growing their business model by expanding into various markets around the globe. Many associates want to expand their horizons, taking time to discover localized nuances and the perspectives of team members in firm locations outside of their home country.

Associates who are working across borders need also to understand cultural nuances. Working in sync with a better understanding of underlying cultural norms puts the associate in a more competitive position.

Business Development

No doubt, providing excellent high quality legal services to clients is still and will always be paramount.

Post-recession, however, it has become far more important for young lawyers to quickly learn business development skills. The responsibility for growing legal business and building strong client relations is no longer just the responsibility of the relationship partner. During the past decade, lawyers have discovered that creating and securing new business is part of the client service life cycle.

Associates are being asked earlier in their careers to build these skills and relationships by creating business plans. Associates have and will need to continue to understand the business of their clients: What is their strategy, their structure, their product line? What are the problems the clients are trying to solve? Simply stated, associates today need to be much more knowledgeable about the business of their clients.

Professional Development

The learning function at firms has grown immensely in the last 10 years. Initially, attorney development departments were created to assist in CLE tracking and coordination of programming. Now this function has emerged as a competitive advantage.

If a firm does not have a robust development program not only focused on legal substantive work, but also professional skills, business development and leadership skills, associates will not get the support and growth needed to excel. Learning continues long after law school in the practice of law, and associates should be afforded the benefit of those programs as they progress in their careers.

Diversity and Inclusion

Over the last 10 years, there has been a much-needed focus in the legal profession on creating a diverse talent pool at all levels. Research shows that organizations that have a diverse population perform better financially, make better decisions and have a more transparent and trusting culture, which is crucial in retaining top talent.

However, hiring and promoting a diverse work force is only one piece of the puzzle. Firms have and should continue to create various programs that help associates with diverse backgrounds network and receive mentoring to be integrated into the firm's work, creating a culture of inclusivity. Many clients are requiring firms to have a diverse talent pool to work on their legal matters, so that the firm reflects the population in which they do business.

Associate Compensation

Stated simply, the ever-increasing pressure to raise compensation has condensed the period in which lawyers must become practice-ready following law school graduation.

What's Next

Many of these trends will continue into the next decade and will become more complex and sophisticated. These important initiatives will focus on an associate's well-being, diversity, inclusion and business development through client relationship building. The overarching impact on firms and associates is the fast pace and emergence of new legal technologies.

Firms that continue to innovate for their clients and the legal work they do will be able to differentiate themselves in the legal market, respond much more quickly to client needs and will not appear

antiquated when attracting new associates. Associates will have a critical role in contributing and using technology at law firms.

Over the next five years, what will be the necessary qualities and characteristics of the next generation of lawyers? How will the next group of associates from law school operate? What are their expectations? How will they practice law?

The upcoming generation z or the i-generation has lived with technology since birth. They don't know a world without search engines or without a device in their hands. The juxtaposition between genz's reliance on using social media and mobile technology balanced with the profession's needs for privacy and risk of data breaches will be a trend that continues to be worth watching.

These associates' needs and what is important to them will impact how firms hire and retain associate talent. Programs focused on work/life, health and well-being, and culture will become increasingly necessary. We have learned that firms that keep up with associate trends and are flexible and agile respond best to those needs through programs, procedures and culture.

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