



Judging talent: the appliance of science

Tony Askham, HR and training partner, Bond Pearce

CAREERS

Perhaps it's in the nature of our business, but solicitors do not enjoy a reputation as innovators. Staunch and conservative is nearer the mark – qualities that have served us well, but which may not be enough to turn ambitious firms into leading providers of legal services.

We have to think in terms of partners as leaders, and profitable growth depends on having the right leadership. Traditionally this has meant appointing people to the board because they had risen to the top of their department. It is rare that much thought is given to their management, financial, business development or people skills. But these are precisely the assets that leaders need. In today's competitive environment, the search for business opportunities demands a board that can look beyond day-to-day operations and contribute to the firm's development over the longer term. A board stuffed full of legal eagles is simply not enough.

To become more commercially focused we need boards of all the talents; a force for cultural change both in how we work with our clients and how we manage our people. At Bond Pearce we decided to use business psychologists to help get the balance right, to identify the strengths and development needs of partners and to uncover future leaders.

The firm was familiar with psychological profiling as a business tool and was sold on the benefits of succession planning and assessment programmes.

Psychological profiling was rolled out throughout the firm. At the heart of the methodology was a greater emphasis on thorough business planning, an improved appraisal system and better communication. Key to the programme's success, however, was the importance given to a lawyer's potential, and not just their track record, in spotting likely candidates for promotion.

Using psychological techniques and psychometric testing designed to spot what an employee is capable of, rather than merely measuring past achievement, business psychologists Kaisen Consulting was able to make a number of recommendations.

We are convinced that business psychology works. Motivating, focusing and engaging staff – even for those with no ambition to become partners – feeds into a more effective presence among our target client groups. Profiling reinforces understanding of a lawyer's qualities and suggests possible alternative career progression within the firm other than board promotion.

Law firms are starting to accept that, alongside business skills, partners should have 'people' skills too. They are expected to be team players as well as leaders and role models. These moves follow rapid changes in the relationship between staff and managers. In law firms intelligent, ambitious individuals feel

encouraged to be more assertive and demand high-quality management. Partners are expected to take a real interest in their career development and to respond effectively to any issues they might have. It is no longer an option of simply leaving people problems to HR; the buck stops at the partner's desk.

Psychological profiling can help one to understand the characteristics of the partners, or potential partners, who are capable of fulfilling these roles.

Profiling reinforces understanding of a lawyer's qualities and suggests possible alternative career progression within the firm other than board promotion

The success of the initial project is such that business psychology is now at the heart of our annual staff survey. The idea here is to gauge employee engagement with the firm's ethos and see how motivated people are. But the survey also provides us with a means of benchmarking the results against other law firms – so we can see how competitive we are.

Our emphasis on the pursuit of new business opportunities may not be typical of the average law firm's approach to growth. Perhaps it should be. To move forward firms must recognise their own strengths, acknowledge where development is needed and find leaders for the future. Business psychology is a vital part of the process.