

ROLE MODELS

BARRY DAVIES, PRACTICE DIRECTOR



ABOUT

Barry Davies
Practice director,
Douglas-Jones Mercer
www.djm.law.co.uk



Recent figures show that there are a shade over 130,000 people on the roll of solicitors in England and Wales – 20% of those undertake an in-house role, 80% are classed as employed. An enormous number, and this is before we consider the significant chunk of employees, namely professional managers, support staff and those lawyers who are not on the Law Society roll. But lots of firms I speak with say ‘we have too many partners’, or they have reduced the number of ‘chiefs’ within their practice as part of their strategic planning.

Where are we going with this? What will the future firm look like? What will its stakeholders (not necessarily shareholders) expect?

The two facets that will impact upon the future will undoubtedly be generational attitudes and technology. Though advancements in processing power will mean huge growth of AI systems over the next decade, I think generational attitudes is the facet that’s most interesting right now.

Generation X lawyers (born between the early 1960s to mid-1970s) are often already partners. This generation, and the baby boomers before them, are usually motivated by achievement and money. Generation Y lawyers, on the other hand, (born in the 1980s or 1990s), are looking for something else. Fearing that I sound like a textbook – specifically Frederick Herzberg’s theory of motivation hygiene – it’s not money that’ll be the key factor in recruiting millennials but other drivers such as networks, recognition, quality of work and conditions.

Developing reward and recognition strategies is

difficult enough for partners – so how does a law firm tackle its entire workforce? A few years ago, I held a discussion with a law firm partner and a question put to me was: could the ‘John Lewis model’ fit a law firm? This term is not only synonymous with the department store, it has become a household phrase.

Quite a few law firms have, for some time now, introduced a corporate partner – a limited company – as a partner within its practice with the intention of dealing with distribution of profits more efficiently or as part of a bonus pool. So it’s quite interesting to hear that a highly regarded firm in the south west, Stephens Scown, has developed a similar model to the John Lewis theme.

What’s different about this example is that a proportion of the firm is owned by a trust for its employees and not just its partners. This gives the employees of the firm a greater sense of belonging and the added impetus to do well. I am certain that some critics would question the mechanics of such a scheme and perhaps the barriers to entry, such as defined profit levels, but setting this aside, it is a means of boosting staff engagement and eradicating the ‘them and us’ mentality.

With complications in all corners of law firm ownership, new models will have to be explored to cover aspirations of all involved. There could come a time when a crowdfunding option is explored generally, and maybe the household name for staff stakeholder mechanisms in law firms will be the Stephens Scown model. **LPM**