

+

 PRACTISING WELL


How to attract, train and keep the best business developers

BY **EMILY MORROW**

THE BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT 'anatomy' of a typical law firm often looks a bit like this:

- 10 to 15% of the lawyers are superstar business developers.
- 20 to 30% are good business developers.
- 30% are very good client minders and reasonably good business developers.
- The remainder are capable lawyers, provide good to excellent client service, but are not particularly skilled business developers.

The long-term viability of a firm will depend, in large part, on its business developers. That said, lawyers who are excellent 'minders' and skilled 'grinders' are also critical. Without

them, clients may not stick with a firm. However, without strong business developers, a firm may not even have clients.

As the legal market in New Zealand becomes increasingly competitive and legal services are more of a fungible commodity, the ability to build a practice becomes absolutely critical. It's no longer just a good thing to do, it's 'job one'.

In my mind, superstar business developers consistently:

- attract excellent clients,
- maintain high quality professional relationships with clients and others,
- can do the technical work, but delegate much of it to a high functioning team,

- have enviable and highly respected internal and external profiles,
- attend to the details of each job but see these in a larger context,
- bring an entrepreneurial attitude to the profession,
- engage in succession planning for their practice throughout their career.

Good business developers attract and retain a certain amount of business each year, tend to do more of their own work, delegate less and often have an average external profile and a very good internal profile.

Excellent 'minders' and 'grinders' do bring some new business into a firm, though usually less reliably so.

Lawyers often ask me if business development skills can be taught. My answer is that they can and every lawyer can, and should, in some way, contribute to the growth of their practice or firm.

That said, the challenges lawyers face in building their practices, how they go about addressing them and their level of success in doing so, will be as individual and

varied as the lawyers themselves.

Some lawyers will take to the process like ducks to water, and have great success. These are the 'naturals', but not everyone is a natural, nor will everyone be an outstanding business developer. But everyone has the potential to engage in successful rainmaking of some sort. The trick is to identify your strengths and interests, tailor your business development strategies accordingly and go at it with focus, drive, self-confidence and consistency.

Identifying the High Potentials

One might assume that extroverts will be better business developers than introverts. This is not necessarily true. In fact, introverts can be excellent business developers, but their approach will differ.

- Here are some things you might look for in high potential business developers. They tend to be people who:
- are comfortable in their own skins and insightful about themselves and others,
- make others feel appreciated, valued and understood, but do not engage in 'deceitful flattery',
- are skilled communicators who remain true to their core values while tailoring their interactions with others to suit the individual and the situation,
- have a genuine interest in others, actively listen and easily build high trust professional relationships,
- are entrepreneurial, see change as an opportunity (rather than a threat), are optimistic, but can handle failure or rejection,
- are empathetic and creative, but tough realists and good business people.

This list of capabilities is, to some extent about 'nature', but not entirely. That's where the cultivation comes in.

The Cultivation Process

How can a firm cultivate business development skills amongst its lawyers? Consider Ann, a capable senior

associate in a mid-sized firm that has invested heavily in her professional development. Ann is being considered for partnership, but the partners question whether she can build a partner level practice. What can they do to cultivate Ann as a high potential lawyer?

When I met with Ann, she expressed concerns about her ability to inspire confidence in others, build professional relationships, and be comfortable in larger social settings. She found it difficult to convert small talk into a professional conversation that would convert into new instructions.

We discussed strategies to enhance her conversational skills, including asking others about themselves, engaging in active listening, and better aligning her body language, facial expressions and tone with discussion content. Ann identified ways in which she could segue a polite, social discussion into a more focused professional one and introduce the topic of work referrals.

Armed with these approaches, Ann initiated some meetings with prospective clients and these went well. She was beginning to address the confidence issues that had held her back in the past.

I then encouraged her to develop a business plan with strategies to achieve her professional development goals. We focused on the details of this process, including who she would contact, what outcomes she wanted, speaking and writing opportunities she could pursue, networking ideas and collaborating with others in her firm. This gave Ann the confidence she needed to begin taking some risks, trying new approaches and proactively raising her profile.

After six months of implementing her plan, Ann had an appraisal meeting with the partners and received positive feedback. Several clients had remarked on her enhanced communication skills, she had received new referral work and was actively engaged in meeting with prospective clients. Ann and the partners identified some additional approaches she could incorporate into her business development efforts. I am pleased with her success, and so is she.

Retention of Business Developers

Let's assume you've identified, hired and cultivated high potential business developers within your firm. In fact,

Everyone has the potential to engage in successful rainmaking of some sort. The trick is to identify your strengths and interests, tailor your business development strategies accordingly and go at it with focus, drive, self-confidence and consistency.

you've got some real superstars in the making. These people will be invaluable to your company, but also of real interest to other firms for obvious reasons. Here's what I've noticed can keep strong business developers loyal:

- They are often independent, creative and self-starters. Acknowledge this, give them some latitude and support their efforts. They trust their instincts.
- Having a firm culture that recognises the importance of practice building and profitability, while also valuing collaboration, integrity, trust and communication.
- Gifted business developers stay longer with firms that take calculated risks in terms of investing in their future success and giving them the resources they need. Sometimes a firm will need to hire new staff and allocate other resources before work comes in. Getting this right really matters.
- Having a compensation system that takes into account new business development. That said, money is not the sole factor in building loyalty to a firm, and I have seen superstars stay with firms because they like the firm culture, even though they could earn more elsewhere.
- Having a succession plan for your top business developers.

No doubt, some lawyers truly are naturals when it comes to practice development. However, many others cultivate these capabilities and find, to their surprise, that they enjoy doing so and can be very successful. Building a thriving practice, cultivating it over the course of one's professional career, and then passing it along to the next generation is one of the more satisfying things a lawyer can do.

Emily Morrow, BA(Hons), JD (Hons) was a lawyer and senior partner with a large firm in the United States. She now resides in Auckland and provides tailored consulting services for lawyers, focusing on non-technical skills that correlate with professional success.