

Navigating cultural change and validation expectations in the modern legal workplace

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Many in the legal field are quick to say that young associates are not getting the most out of the law firm experience if they are not working in-person, however, they don't consider that our newest crop of attorneys has both learned and been formed in some type of virtual environment their whole lives. The disconnect isn't just in how these associates are able to learn, it exists equally in how partners are able to teach. Discovering and committing to engaging on a middle ground is where we will achieve tangible progress.

There is an urgency to understanding how we build relationships, who we allow to maintain them, and who has access to their origination in the first place.

The legal industry has always been a profession where individual and firm success is based on quality of work, consistency in results, and the ability to build, maintain, and navigate long-standing relationships. As cultural norms and values have begun to shift, we see for the first time a request, coupled with an expectation that the veil of subjectivity be lifted, and clarity and metrics be what are found underneath.

The idea of "good" work can be coded, when lacking an outline and a willingness to embrace historically non-traditional approaches. There is an urgency to understanding how we build relationships, who we allow to maintain them, and who has access to their origination in the first place. Much of the shroud that contributes to the aura of cool aloofness that can be associated with this industry is being called into question and it is rattling the foundation of how and where we work.

Echoing through the metaphorical and physical halls of firms across the country are phrases like the following:

"I get more work done from home — I'm more productive and less distracted."

"People need to come into the office to be more productive. Hours are down."

"This meeting could have been an email."

"An in-person conversation gives us the chance to build relationships."

"Why didn't you just call or text me?"

"It's much easier to walk down the hall to pull an associate in on something, and have a back and forth that way, than it is to try to navigate that via phone or Zoom."

"They are never going to change."

"This is the way we did it when I was an associate."

An emphasis on preserving the way that we were taught, coupled with an enthusiasm for preserving what has historically brought us success, finds us stagnated and at a fortunately, surmountable impasse. When we look at the generational groups holding the majority of leadership seats, they were either directly impacted or influenced by people who had to learn to navigate the pitfalls of the professional landscape during times of economic and international strife, including U.S. involvement in war, famine abroad and cycles of economic depression. Success was a literal matter of life and death and the path towards it, an arguable course to economic freedom, if not privilege.

Juxtapose that scenario against the generational groups ascending into those seats, whose lives have been molded by advents of technology, as well as the way those innovations have changed the human experience and relationship architecture. Millennials and Gen-Z have grown up in a world where it is natural to search for your partner on the same machine as they use to shop for groceries and research options for egg retrieval and family planning, even if they don't personally do so.

The boundaries between what is personal and private and what and how information should be shared, have shifted. For this group, conversations around mental health and self-care are becoming largely normalized and an expectation that others have empathy for these topics is prevalent.

In addition to groups who not only communicate differently but have widely differing views on the ways that communication can look, we also have groups that receive validation differently. Traditionalists often favor quality time, Baby Boomers gifts, Gen X acts of service, Millennials words of affirmation, and Gen-Z, touch.

Traditionalists and Baby Boomers value hierarchy, extoll the virtues of success-based merit and are keenly aware of the value of relationships along that path. When we examine the ways that these groups were shown appreciation in the workplace, it harkens to times of expensive watches, mantel clocks, bonuses, and cocktail parties. Conversely, when we look at the requests of Millennials and Gen-Z, we see requests such as PTO days, time and access to self-care, flexibility in working options, and formalized mentorship opportunities that may be otherwise inaccessible.

In a world where the historic law firm model is increasingly losing its appeal, in-house options are becoming more prevalent, and more people are becoming disillusioned, it is the responsibility of every person in a position of leadership or influence to chart a new course forward.

Anyone who has had the privilege of being a member of a well-functioning relationship understands that you must give in the language that the other person in the relationship receives. If someone who enjoys receiving gifts exclusively presents gifts to someone who enjoys words of affirmation, or vice versa, the action becomes a lot less impactful. It would be much more meaningful for the person who enjoys receiving gifts to tell that person about something wonderful they've done, or a way that they've contributed

in a meaningful way to the relationship. Chapman, G. D., "The 5 Love Languages" (Northfield Publishing, 2010).

The same values hold true in the workplace. If we can get to a place where we learn that someone else's way of earning and receiving validation is just as important as our own, we will begin to see real progress in the efficiency and productivity of the legal workplace.

While the call to revisit previously established in-person working practices rings clear, we must also consider why we are ringing that bell, and what we are willing to do so people answer that call with resounding enthusiasm. In a world where the historic law firm model is increasingly losing its appeal, in-house options are becoming more prevalent, and more people are becoming disillusioned, it is the responsibility of every person in a position of leadership or influence to chart a new course forward.

The value of face-to-face interaction cannot be overstated, when those interactions are purposeful, curated, and structured with intentionality. This remains true even if the action is circumstantial. Similarly, the value of embracing flexibility and agility must not be overstated — these qualities literally carried us through a global pandemic!

So then, what changed? Engagement has taken a nosedive because we have always placed emphasis on building relationships with less care for what it takes to maintain them when we are not in a situation of convenience or comfort. We are currently in a time of growth and adaptation, neither of which occurs in a space of convenience or comfort. Each of us will need to put in the time and the work to understand how to nurture our relationships and each other — our greatest commodity is now also our most costly tool, but what that tool can build when wielded well, will be priceless.

About the author



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