

In-Office Engagement Is Essential To Associate Development

By **Liisa Thomas** (August 8, 2023)

As firms continue to grapple with the balance between returning to the office and working from home, the impact of interactivity on career development can get lost. Law firms, perhaps more than other professional services firms, rely heavily on the apprenticeship model.

Traditional models of associate development were developed with in-person engagement in mind. And not only daily engagement with those for whom you work regularly, but observing and interacting with partners and senior associates with whom you do not typically interact.



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Over time, you select ways of working that resonate, and integrate them into your daily routine. That model doesn't work, however, if everyone isn't in the office.

Types of Work And the Impact on Return to Office

At the same time that we are thinking collectively about the right approach for returning to the office, knowledge workers are feeling the pressure to balance deep and shallow work.

The terms "deep work" and "shallow work" were coined by Georgetown professor Cal Newport in his study on how to find depth in a distracted work world. Deep work refers to concentrated work on difficult tasks, while shallow work refers to work that is more interactive, such as logistics or communication tasks.

The former is best done without interruption; the latter can be done even if someone is interrupted frequently. This is not a new conversation, but it has taken on more importance as companies think about their return to office approach.

Doing shallow work makes sense in an office, especially to the extent that the tasks involve communication done in connection with others, but the former may work best at home. However, professional services workers may feel that they should only engage in — or may only be rewarded for — the amount of deep work they accomplish.

This creates a strong incentive to stay home, keep one's head down, and stay productive. Couple this with difficult commutes, and returning to the office is all that much harder.

Balancing these two threads has resulted in debates about the right balance between in-office and in-home work. Much discussion has been made of preserving culture. This is undoubtedly important.

What may be getting lost in the remote versus return-to-office conversation, however, is the impact in-office attendance — or lack thereof — will have on professional development. This, though, is an important part of the conversation and not something to be overlooked.

Motivational Attributes, Associate Development and Return to Office

I have spent significant time thinking about and researching development paths for lawyers in law firm settings. Success in this space usually means achieving rainmaker partner

status. In other words, being a revenue generator, unlike income partners, who while they have achieved seniority in their firms, typically do not generate revenue.

Because of the business importance revenue generation has, rainmaking partners are often the ones who run their firms. If not in official roles, then at a minimum they will have higher influence than others.

After witnessing many rainmaking development efforts fail, I, like many others, wondered if there was some sort of special sauce: something that led some people to become rainmakers and others to veer away from that path.

Operating with a goal of diversifying rainmaking and thus law firm leadership ranks, I wanted to see if there were particular attributes of rainmakers that could be identified. And, once identified, could be developed in others.

What I've learned is that rainmaking partners have statistically higher levels of several motivational attributes. Attributes that have been studied in other fields, but not in the legal field. Namely, they have higher levels of zest, a greater sense that they are living a calling, and more perceived autonomy and competence.

Why does this matter for associate development? First because each of these attributes can be developed; they are not innate or inborn. And, second, the earlier we begin developing these attributes, the better head-start we give to their development.

In other words, helping associates strengthen these attributes before they become partners means they may be more successful partners.

The development of these attributes usually requires self-work, but also scaffolding by firms or coaches. That scaffolding is much harder to build if people are not spending significant time together. And, the easiest place to spend that time together? In the office.

As law firms are developing their return-to-office approaches, keeping these attributes in mind can help inform their policies and procedures surrounding in-office engagement. I take each in turn, and for each provide suggestions of how in-person engagement can help firms develop these attributes in their associates. I've also tried to include a few ideas of things associates reading this could do themselves, with or without external supports.

Living a Calling

The concept of living a calling is based on work done by Ryan Duffy, a psychology professor at University of Florida and author of many scholarly articles, as well as the book "Make Your Job a Calling." According to Duffy, living a calling means that you are doing work that is fulfilling to you. In other words, your work provides you with a sense of purpose.

Those who are living a calling have been found to be both more committed to their work and more successful in their careers. One way people have successfully increased their feelings of "calling" has been to engage in a concept called job crafting, a term developed by the psychologist Amy Wrzesniewski of Yale School of Management.

Job crafting can occur by tailoring your tasks to meet your passion. To do this in a professional services firm, you will often need to rely on strong connections. For example, by outsourcing activities you do not enjoy either to your peers or to juniors.

There are many aspects of living a calling that firms can more easily promote and develop when attorneys are in person. Take job crafting. Having strong relationships where you know your colleagues well enough to understand what they enjoy — and to broker an exchange of tasks — is easier when you have regular in-person interactions with them.

Other methods for increasing living a calling might take a dual approach. For example, Wrześniewski suggests that individuals increase their sense of living a calling through self-reflection. Namely, by identifying one's personal mission: what are the things that are of particular value to you?

This is the kind of deep work that associates could do at home. But actualizing the results of that deep work would be done in the office. Even if the meaningful work does not occur in the office, the recognition of that work would.

Zest

Under the theory of positive psychology, whose lead thinker is Martin Seligman of University of Pennsylvania, we all have core character strengths. One of these is zest: the sense of approaching your work and your life with excitement and energy. Zest has been positively linked by researchers to both work success and life satisfaction.

One way to increase feelings of zest is not only to identify work that is meaningful to you and to engage in that work, but also to share your areas of passion with others. In person, an associate could increase their zest with relatively small and easy interventions.

For example, short passion-related conversations when getting coffee or when running into someone in the lunchroom. It is harder to share your passion regularly with others if those informal and spontaneous avenues are not available, and the only opportunity is through planned video calls or chat.

Autonomy and Competence

Perceptions of autonomy and competence are two of three basic needs under University of Rochester psychology professors Richard Ryan and Edward Deci's self-determination theory. Under that theory, we all have three basic needs — the third being a sense of connection — and the more those needs are met, the more successful we are.

Based on my research, rainmaking partners have greater perceptions of both autonomy and competence than nonrainmakers. This mirrors what the researchers found in fields outside the law.

At first glance, it may appear that autonomy would be increased by working remotely. What is more autonomous than being alone? However, the terms are not synonymous.

Methods for increasing a sense of autonomy include giving people opportunities to take on added challenges or develop new skills. These are two things that managers can more easily do when they know someone both as a worker and as an individual. With that knowledge — more easily gained by in-person interactions — managers can give appropriate stretch assignments.

A sense of competence, on the other hand, can be increased by helping people identify and work to their strengths. This is something more easily done, again, if the manager interacts with that individual regularly in-person.

Putting It Into Practice

Obviously, promoting and supporting workers' development can be done when both the manager and the worker are remote. However, in professional-services industries, and especially the law, it is much, much easier when both the associates and their colleagues are in the office.

As firms develop their in-person engagement requirements, developing and growing future leaders should be a part of the conversation, a conversation that should include two important questions:

- How can this associate become a partner?; and
- How can this associate be a partner-leader at my firm?

This means understanding how to develop rainmakers.

From the attributes described here, and interventions described to develop those attributes, there are several lessons firms can take away. Some suggestions are listed below, but perhaps the most important tip is to be thoughtful and deliberate in the in-person engagement you create.

There are of course many reasons to bring people together, but to the extent that the goal is to help foster associate development, as this article advocates, thought should be given to what attributes an activity supports. Obviously firms will need to select what is the right for the overall firm and office culture, and avoid overwhelming attorneys who are, of course, also trying to get deep work done.

Think Beyond Bagels

Look for opportunities to allow associates to share their passions. This doesn't have to involve an elaborate breakfast. Firms could borrow from the physician and educator Maria Montessori, and prepare the environment: Create areas that are attractive, comfortable and centrally located.

This might be where attorneys get coffee and water — and stay a few minutes to tell a story about something they are passionate about.

Foster Opportunities for Attorneys To Know Each Other Better

Part of job crafting might mean delegating away things you do not like to do. Or, taking on work others are doing that you enjoy more. These might be other attorneys within your practice group, or those outside of your group.

Helping attorneys get to know each other on a personal level — even people with whom they do not typically work — means supporting job-crafting efforts. Time spent in person might include meaningful activities that bring together attorneys from different practice areas. Pose those attorneys with a task and ask them to find a solution — for example: How do we bring more people into the office?

To help support a sense of autonomy, the research suggests taking on stretch goals. This can of course be done remotely, but getting stretch opportunities is often easier in person.

It is often after the official meeting ends that the "oh by the way" opportunity arises.

In a world of Zoom, those opportunities are less likely to come up. So for associates, seeking out stretch opportunities might be easier in person, and similarly it might be easier to give associates stretch opportunities when spending time with them in person.

Working toward one's strengths can support a sense of competence. Obviously, you can get to know associates' strengths by working with them in a remote environment. But you will likely get to know their strengths better if you regularly interface with them in person.

That gives them an opportunity to show you the skills they demonstrate when the Zoom camera goes off, or after the asynchronous email is sent. Associates can also take the time in person to demonstrate those strengths, and help their partners direct work to them that speaks to those strengths.

Give Associates Opportunities To Share

Associates may spend time identifying things in their work that are meaningful to them. When in person, give those attorneys the opportunity to share their passions.

The opportunity might be formal — a presentation at an all-attorney meeting — or it might be informal — connecting the associate with someone they do not otherwise know who is looking to learn more about the area in which the associate is passionate.

Supporting this information sharing might require facilitators, those who know what the different attorneys are working on and the areas in which others might be interested.

Conclusion

These are just a few ideas. Hopefully they add to the conversation that firms are already having about the benefits of in-person engagement by demonstrating to both partners and associates the very real benefits these engagements can have on associates' career development. And at the same time, these suggestions may help firms as they look toward developing their leaders of tomorrow.

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