

Mind over matter

Nick Jarrett-Kerr suggests routes towards the expansion of educational horizons for lawyers

After years of expensive study, newly-qualified lawyers often settle back and reassure themselves that their educational travails are over for good. The problem is that law is a somewhat narrow area of study and lawyers who are no more than proficient technically sometimes find it difficult to advise their clients holistically or to manage their teams proficiently. Many larger law firms now insist that law firm partners have more strings to their bow than just a legal qualification. Areas such as construction law, employment law, banking law, finance law, and medical negligence law (to name a few) are all examples of specialisms where a dual qualification offers immense benefits. Additional language qualifications are also beneficial—some lawyers are now learning Mandarin, for instance, as the importance of the Chinese economy increases.

Ownership & management

As careers develop, so does the need for a wider educational horizon. Law firm partners have to fulfil three roles—those of owners and managers as well as producers. Ownership and management each require skills not taught in law schools and demand both innate attributes and learned competencies. My work teaching on an MBA in legal services persuades me that—in common with other industry and professional service sectors—MBA qualifications can benefit many lawyers and help them to face their leadership challenges. The problem, of course, is that few managing partners and busy law firm members have time for heavily time-intensive courses and programmes. At the other extreme, however, the traditional method of slow learning in the “school of hard knocks” leads to reinvention of the wheel and the repeating history of management mistakes. On-the-job learning can be very powerful but is unlikely to be sufficiently urgent or focused to benefit firms quickly in an ever-faster moving world.

It would help if lawyers became wider read. When I first became a managing partner with limited time, I felt it helpful to have a personal target of reading at least one management book a month. I often failed but managed to average eight or nine books a year. This helped me immensely to move up the learning curve of strategy, management and leadership.

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Change of attitude

We need a change of attitude on the part of lawyers and their firms towards a learning culture in which extra qualifications become the rule rather than the exception, where learning is whole-heartedly embraced, encouraged

and rewarded at every stage, age and seniority, and where lawyers who fail to move beyond a narrow technical proficiency in black letter law hit a promotion ceiling earlier in their careers than hitherto.

The big question is how to achieve this learning nirvana. One problem is that, while twin-professional qualifications are good to have, they are also time-consuming and costly to obtain. It is therefore helpful that short courses, executive programmes, and individual coaching are now all widely available. With online learning also easily accessible, there is now no barrier to advanced education. A learning culture is as much a matter of individual inclination as it is organisational behavioural in the best firms. While the latter can reinforce the former, individual lawyers nevertheless need to develop the discipline and enthusiasm to “live every day as if it is your last, but to learn as if you will live forever”.

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The (CPD) way ahead

It's autumn and the chill realisation strikes that the solicitors' CPD year is coming to an end. How many of us have slotted something in at the last minute to make up our numbers? Let's start the new CPD year resolving to do better. Both the Solicitors Regulation Authority and Bar Standards Board explicitly encourage us to plan. So, plan now. Think about four areas:

- Keep up to date. What areas of law and procedure do you have to keep up to date in next year? What free lectures are available in your area? What's available via podcast or webinar? Could you stay abreast in your area by researching and writing an article?
- Skills. Be honest with yourself: where do your skills fall down? Negotiation? Breaking bad news? Networking? You can read and attend courses on some of these but both the SRA and ILEX schemes explicitly allow coaching and work shadowing to count for CPD purposes.
- How well do you understand the implications for (possibly new) regulation of your practice? With so much changing this must be a special priority.
- Something for you. It's easy to become stale or to reach a plateau and get stuck there. Think of something you can do to reinvigorate yourself. A new area of law? Delivering CPD rather than receiving it?

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