

FIRMS BROADEN TRAINING AMID CONCERN GRADUATES ARE ILL-PREPARED

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Law firm training programmes now include more instruction in non-legal skills due to worries that law courses are “woefully inadequate” preparation for a career in a modern law firm

Law firms are placing a greater emphasis on developing training programmes that enhance young lawyers' non-legal skills – such as “client care”, negotiation, pricing and management – amid widespread concern that law graduates are leaving university insufficiently prepared for a career in a law firm.

Next month, leading Spanish firm Uría Menéndez will officially launch a training course – in conjunction with IE business school – that will include improving lawyers business-related skills among its key objectives. The “IE-UM Professional Development Programme for Lawyers” is three years in duration and comprises a total of 140 teaching hours – in addition to legal subjects, the firm

says the course will include “business and economic subjects and skills”.

Explaining the need for such training, Uriá Menéndez partner José Massaguer says young lawyers often lack vital attributes necessary for a career in a law firm including “client care” skills, and, in the case of more experienced lawyers, leadership and management skills. He adds: “The education in law school is not focussed on legal practice – young lawyers usually have knowledge of the law but are not yet equipped to practice law.”

Pérez-Llorca’s training priorities include ensuring its lawyers are fully up-to-date with the latest developments in areas in “finance, the stock market and energy”. Partner and corporate director Constanza Vergara Jaakkola adds: “We have made sure that our lawyers are fully trained in these fields – once the technical side of the programme has been covered, training lawyers in commercial skills and guiding them through how to attract new clients are also important objectives.”

She continues: “Young lawyers start with an excellent technical background, however they must learn to frame and adapt this legal knowledge to the client’s needs.”

Some firms have instituted their own learning academies. Margarida Couto, partner at Vieira de Almeida in Portugal and president of the VdAcademia board, says the skills law students learn at university are “woefully inadequate” preparation for a career in a law firm. “Although we have seen minor changes in the curricula of universities, these are outdated,” she adds. “The approach to law is a twentieth-century approach and doesn’t consider the new millennium challenges for advocacy.” According to Couto, among the challenges law firms face when providing new types of training for lawyers is developing skills that are “non-existent” in the typical law graduate – these include management and business development. Couto describes the typical lawyer as an “analytical introvert who likes office work, reading researching and writing”. She adds: “This is a profile that feels more attracted to law school, where these skills are overrated.”

However, others in the legal sector argue that law schools are becoming more innovative in the way in which they prepare students for life in a law firm.

José Luis Moreira da Silva, human resources director at Lisbon-based SRS Advogados says: “In Portugal, the top law schools are increasingly focused on training law graduates in cross-functional skills and to think more outside the box.” That said, Moreira da Silva adds that SRS Advogados is investing in “soft skills training” for its lawyers – this training includes client generation, stress management, and leadership.

Evaluating the success of programmes is important, according to Vergara Jaakkola who says that Pérez-Llorca’s training programmes are developed by the human resources team in partnership with an academic committee that includes partners and the knowledge management manager. She adds: “HR analyses feedback given by the attendees at each session and subsequently sends a report to both the lecturers and members of the academic committee.”

Abreu Advogados managing partner Duarte Athayde argues that above all the quality of training offered by a law firm can impact on its ability to attract potential recruits. “Training can be a deciding factor when accepting or refusing a new or potential job offer,” he adds. IL