

GENERATION Y - THE GOOD AND THE BAD NEWS FOR LAW FIRMS, ROMANA SADURSKA

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The key issue facing law firms' continued success is their ability to attract and retain a new generation of lawyers, and those that are most likely to succeed will be those most willing to

embrace innovation, says Romana Sadurska of Uría Menéndez.

Generation Y are children of the baby-boomers. They are shaped by their distinct educational and social experience and by technology's unprecedented influence on their lives. They are the most nurtured generation of kids in human history, raised in ever-smaller families, classes and social groups and accustomed to being the centre of attention. They learned how to use computers before they mastered handwriting. Internet and mobile phones have formed part of their routines of communication and learning from childhood and, consequently, have led them to modes of thinking and expression that are less systematic and more superficial. It is an upbeat generation, self-confident, pragmatic, used to openness and instantaneous – and almost always positive – feedback. They are making law firms innovate in three significant ways.

Firstly, they are challenging the "survival of the fittest" culture that still prevails in many law firms. A culture in which a young person has to learn quickly and by trial and error, using training programmes but often with minimal involvement of the partners, who are busy with clients and other professional matters. These new young lawyers, however, value personal guidance and respond well in a collaborative environment. They want to make a difference, to contribute to the result. This motivates them and cultivates an allegiance to the firm. To respond adequately to the expectations of the junior lawyers, law firms have to go back to basics: partners must become "maestros" (an idea so dear to our firm's founding partner, Rodrigo Uría), dedicating time and effort to ensure continual training and coaching of associates. In other words, it means working directly with the trainees and junior lawyers.

Secondly, Generation Y struggle to adapt to the traditional methods of the legal profession: based on research, in-depth analysis and reasoning from principles, rules and precedents. This clashes with the young lawyers predilection for the immediate results available from document and knowledge management systems. Speed of delivery, often under pressure from clients and supervisors, puts thoughtfulness at risk. To address this work style, firms must pioneer tailor-made training, emphasising methods of legal thinking, intellectual discipline and thoroughness. Again, nobody is better positioned to do this than the partner-maestro.

Finally, Generation Y is guarded about modern organisations. They do not take much for granted and they question the rationale of traditional standards and schemes. For instance, they doubt, with more vigour than previous generations, the appropriateness of measuring productivity in billable hours.

El mayor reto al que se enfrentan los bufetes de abogados en los años que se avecinan es no sólo contratar una nueva generación de abogados sino también retenerlos, apunta Romana Sadurska, socia y Secretaria General de Uría Menéndez. Las firmas dispuestas a innovar y a adaptarse al cambio de necesidades de esta nueva generación, la Generación Y, son las que más probabilidades de éxito tienen. Esto requerirá, al menos, una vuelta al modelo de formación y desarrollo, aprendiz – maestro.

They are more comfortable with result-based reviews, in which quality, innovation and convenience of the task are the measures by which performance is assessed. This means that law firms should develop methods for evaluating the more intangible aspects of young lawyers' work, and should promote a culture of quality as a way of creating value.

Quite rightly, young associates consider "face time" an unproductive demand, and flexibility in office hours is simply a must in the eyes of this techno-savvy generation who have grown up equipped with remote access tools. No surprise here, they are generally less inclined to sacrifice their private life for their job. That is why they demand ever more efficient organisation, good workplace communication and customised career paths.

These challenges are not easy to resolve. Law firms need to address the issue of an apparent gap between the requirements of a knowledge-based profession and the training of a new generation better equipped for gathering information than for processing it and shaping it into a coherent legal argument. This would seem to force law firms to go back to the maestro-apprentice model of training, even at the cost of sacrificing part of their revenues. Also, I believe that firms should rethink their review criteria, be more responsive to the work-life balance aspirations of the young generation and to their desire to become stakeholders rather than employees.

If law firms manage to respond to these challenges, they will find opportunities to improve their organisation, increase motivation and loyalty of associates, give clients better-quality service and prove, once again, that they can embrace innovation.

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