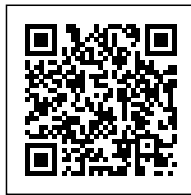


# PLAYING A DIFFERENT GAME

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Category: [Archive](#)



**While law firms are still very much focused on only offering the traditional career path to partnership, Generation Y's associates aren't getting what they want. They see their future in terms of building life skills and a career portfolio, and not necessarily becoming a partner. If the career model doesn't adapt, therefore, law firms could find themselves running low on talent, and future leaders of the firm.**

The rules of engagement have changed, and while law firms and associates used to play on the same team, associates are slowly voicing their views and it turns out that they are actually playing on rather different sides.

The dynamics are changing, and the traditional career path to partnership is no longer suited to today's 'Generation Y' associates. What they want is to replace it with something that is beneficial to both sides – to move from an 'up and out' culture to a 'grow and go' model.

The problem is that they don't feel they have a voice, and if they were to air their views openly and honestly that it would be akin to "career suicide", said one Iberian associate. Becoming a partner is no longer on the radar of many, and their vision of the ideal law firm model is a far cry from today's current pyramid. Instead, they are looking to fill their career 'portfolios', and if law firms don't respond and adapt, they run the risk of losing their leaders of tomorrow.

## **Associates with a new approach**

Generation Y (Gen Y) are the under 30s, full of expectations, goals and ambition, and wanting a shorter return on their working-life investment. They have grown up in a very different economic

environment than their elders, and are unwilling to tread the same path as those before them. The traditional view of climbing the law firm pyramid to reach the partnership pinnacle, associates say, has been replaced by a need to build individual career 'portfolios' and to have a voice and a place, within the law firm. And their approach is very different to that of older generations; no more so than in their vocal desire for a work/life balance.

Many of the older generation look at Gen Y and see only their youth and an inability to conform. "They have short attention spans, want everything now and don't seem to be prepared to put in the work like we did," said one Managing Partner off the record. Others feel that Gen Y are diminishing a cornerstone of the law firm model – its path to partnership. So there is a degree of frustration as Gen Y are looking for more of a purpose than just being a partner.

"Previous generations were more willing to put their heads down and work really hard in the belief that partners would take care of them, and their efforts would be rewarded further down the career track," says Jill King, an Associate Professor on IE Law School's Lawyers' Management Programme (LMP). "The current generation, however, are not prepared to accept a career model based on a deferred promise. They want a rich learning experience and demand a more honest exchange about their realistic career prospects. They want to be treated like grown-ups, and be involved in their own career management, whatever the future might hold."

The big question is whether these desires will be fulfilled by the current market, which is so focused on the sole end goal of partnership.

### **Career path or portfolio?**

When speaking to Gen Y lawyers, the big theme to emerge is that the idea of a traditional career path doesn't mean much at their age. They are not saying 'never', but at this point their time horizons are much shorter.

"Gen Y are much more interested in collecting a portfolio of skills and experiences as opposed to taking sequential steps along the path to any particular destination," says Sally Woodward, Co-Director on IE's LMP and a coach to the leaders of many of the world's most successful law firms. Many law firms spend a great deal of time, money and effort creating a much more stratified career path below partner level to punctuate the 10 years that it can now take from joining the firm to achieving partnership, with some milestones and points of recognition along the way. But the prevailing view, at least in the Gen Y age group, is that it doesn't really affect them unless the milestones help access more interesting experiences and add to their portfolio.

Law firms need to adjust their career offering, say associates, and look very seriously at any alternatives that can give them these opportunities.

As a former Global HR Director at Linklaters, King is sensitive to how career development, expectations and dynamics can vary depending on different local cultures and markets. "In the UK, for example, many associates decide early on that it's more important to gain good experience, and develop skills they can transfer to another firm or sector, rather than to strive for the uncertain prospects of partnership and all the lifestyle consequences that come with it."

### **What associates want**

Woodward recently led a three-day development programme with an international group of Gen Y lawyers, all under 35, and between two to four years qualified.

"There is a new set of aspirations and attitudes around," she says, "in particular Gen Y are questioning the current law firm model, its hierarchy and the traditional career path and so-called 'alternatives' that some firms offer, which are seen as second best to partnership".

One group of participants, for example, questioned the need for 'partners' as opposed to having 'experts' specialised in what they actually enjoy, for example business development, project management, or technical drafting.

A big frustration that emerged was the perception that unless you are in the office you are not working, something that is echoed by the associate lawyers that spoke to Iberian Lawyer. They are

also very against the 'timesheet' concept, as they see it as a "control mechanism".

One thing that particularly annoys Gen Y lawyers is the assumption that 'money doesn't matter'. This is all very well, says one associate off the record, once you get above a certain level, but if paying off student debt and wanting to fund a lifestyle it is still fundamental. "The hypothesis is that for the first 10 years money is important," explains Woodward, "but it diminishes later in their careers and becomes more of a proxy for recognition".

Gen Y wants more freedom to be able to decide how they work, rather than being micro-managed, asking for a level of independence that is not a traditional part of law firm culture. They are also hungry for feedback, honest career conversations and support, with many saying that 'mentoring' is sadly lacking in their respective firms. "Associates want partners to be honest with them in their appraisals," says King. "If a case for partnership is going to be hard to build, partners have a responsibility to explain this, and to commit to developing the skills that will give each associate the best possible chance of securing a role elsewhere when the time comes to move on."

Partners also have excellent client contacts to help them create this sense of active career management. Associates, who know what the game plan is, remain motivated and consequently the firm gets more out of them. If they do go on to work for a client, the firm benefits from the goodwill they take with them. "I realise this can feel uncomfortable for partners as they naturally worry about a mass exodus of associates or of demotivating their best people," adds King, "but in my experience associates respond well to an open supportive approach."

However, the biggest frustration that associates have centres on 'trust'. Gen Y feel that the older generations don't trust them, and don't place them in front of clients or involve them in the law firm strategy or the Board. Many universities have student representative on their Strategy Boards, so the idea of having Gen Y on law firm strategy committees does make sense – they are, after all, part of and the future of the firm.

But the older generation see Gen Y as wanting it all and wanting it now, yet having no idea about the realities or economics of a business. "Interestingly, one of the first things to emerge from the development programme was how associates were very conscious of the need to adapt things so as to suit their needs but also to make it easy and economic for the law firm to do so," says Woodward.

### **Are firms giving them what they want?**

There is an underlying dishonesty about what the prospects for associates really are, with partners feeling unable to say that financially a firm will be unable to appoint more than two or three partners in the next five years. But everyone knows it's true. "These are clever people," says King. "They understand the business model and can assess the prospects for partnership for themselves."

Associates are looking for more flexibility, as are their law firms, so the question is why not try and bring these two together in more open and honest conversation. This could both extend the tenure of the associates and make it more manageable for the firm. "Too many senior associates means work is not delegated effectively," adds King. This in turn leads to associates not receiving the experience they need, and the pyramid becoming progressively unsustainable.

The good news, however, is that the prevailing view among associates is that Iberian law firms are making the right noises, although still very cautious about acting on them. But associates make a good point when they say that many law firm clients are also part of Gen Y, and associates could be used as a clever way to bridge the gap between such clients and the older lawyers.

"Gen Y do accept that the competitive nature of the market is a real constraint, and it is unrealistic of them to think that firms would do things that compromise client service," says Woodward. "But they feel that firms could be much less risk adverse."

### **Making the change**

"There are two key dimensions that need to change", says King. "Law firms need to move away from the traditional 'up and out' culture towards a more sustainable 'grow and go' model, and to

understand the changing perspectives of their associates. My belief is that young lawyers join firms these days looking to be stretched, develop skills and build relationships with colleagues and clients. If firms offer this, and crucially create a culture of open dialogue and active career support, they will then meet the expectations of their associates and manage the pyramid more effectively." There has to be a career 'trade off'. Associates will work hard and serve clients well, but in return the firm has to give something back. If it's not partnership then it has to be high quality work, access to training, development and secondments. Without this, both sides will continue in a career Catch-22. Firms will feel they have to force the exit of senior associates rather than having a much more open dialogue and mutual understanding about how they can support their associates, not just for a future at the firm but for where they may end up when they leave.

"I advise partners to consider their associates as future clients rather than future partners of their firm – realistically it's a more likely outcome. If they do so they quickly become aware of the implications for how they interact, develop and, most importantly, support that associate," adds King.

Associates are hungry to fill their working portfolios, and they will go where the opportunities are. If law firms don't adapt and only focus on breeding partners, they may well find themselves a little short on leadership down the line.

Some say the market needs a seismic shift in approach, much more transparency so as to get rid of current misconceptions, and a culture change to embrace ways of going forwards that are mutually beneficially to everyone involved. Doing so need not be a painful experience. It could in fact provide a passport to career and law firm success.