

PROVIDING TRUE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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Mentoring and coaching can provide real opportunities for lawyers, especially in building capacity and developing individual skills and talent, say Stephen Denyer and Rebecca Normand-Hochman



At almost every stage of their careers, lawyers are expected to master business skills and have an entrepreneurial spirit to either build or contribute to building their law firms. Consequently, mentoring and coaching have become valuable tools for lawyers in developing these skills, as well as doing so in developing countries.

As other types of organisations across the world have done in recent years, a number of law firms are realising the value that coaching and mentoring can have in building capacity, and developing individual skills and talent.

Lawyers as entrepreneurs

In developing economies and emerging markets, managing partners are sometimes the first generation of law firm leaders in their jurisdictions and have no models or precedents to follow. They have to develop their own from the ground up by doing those things that they consider as being important to build and manage their law firm.

Additionally, most lawyers, because of the training that they receive and a natural inclination to be 'technical', are not comfortable or even competent with the business aspects of the practice of law. In emerging markets, such as Russia and other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), since 1992, most law firms have been built from scratch by experienced public service lawyers, sole practitioners or recent law school graduates. In those jurisdictions, managing partners or lawyers looking to build a firm therefore still have very few predecessors to follow or learn from.

A Costa Rican managing partner once said to us that working with a mentor had enabled them to understand the true responsibilities of being a managing partner and to develop a strategy to grow their law firm to the standards of similar international firms.

Having a mentor or a coach enables managing partners and lawyers to discuss challenges, exchange points of view, create networks and find solutions to issues that they hadn't considered. Most importantly, coaches and mentors enable them to understand, acquire and master the fundamental intangible skills required to develop or take part in the development of a law firm.

Mentoring and coaching

There are no specific research studies about the practice or the impact of coaching and mentoring in developing countries yet, but our experience of leading the International Bar Association (IBA) Law Firm Mentoring Programme (LFMP) has enabled us to observe that mentoring is a concept that is easily understood and valued in most developing countries.

An illustration of that is a mentoring event scheduled at the IBA Annual Conference to which lawyers from 58 jurisdictions registered to attend. The LFMP has been designed to support lawyers around the world, but specifically lawyers in developing jurisdictions, who are in the process of starting or growing a firm.

Mentors on the programme are able to share their law firm management experience and expertise that they have gained with the years of practice. And to help those attending to build successful practices as well as giving back to the legal community. Further information can be found at: <https://www.ibanet.org/lawfirmmentors/home.aspx>

A working example

There is a recent interesting pilot coaching initiative run by The London Deanery Coaching and Mentoring Service that involves medical professionals in leadership positions in Malawi, and it has demonstrated the potential benefits of coaching programmes for professionals in developing countries.

After attending the programme, participants observed a significant increase in self awareness and work-life balance, and also in a variety of skills that included management, leadership, teamwork, time and conflicts management, and mentoring.

As these examples of mentoring for lawyers and coaching for doctors show, there is a great deal of growth potential in advancing the practice of coaching and mentoring in developing countries.

With the availability of modern channels of communication, the ways in which coaching and mentoring programmes can be structured are numerous and, provided that they are properly designed and supported, they represent real opportunities for professionals at all stages of their career to develop.

Today, partners in developing countries who initiate and develop strong mentoring relationships or work with a coach are best placed to create real competitive advantages for their law firms.

Stephen Denyer is Co-Head of the IBA's LFMP, former Co-Chair of the IBA Management Committee and Advisory Board Member, and Global Markets Partner at Allen & Overy. Rebecca Normand-Hochman leads the talent management initiatives of the IBA LFMC and is a Founder and Director of the Institute of Mentoring.