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Monday Monday

Connecting the Dots with Karen Kaplowitz



*Helping you create and reinforce the habits of successful career building,
gleaned from my work as a business development strategist, trainer and coach*

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Resistance to Succession Planning: A Disaster Waiting to Happen

Every time a key client relationship partner leaves a firm, the firm is at risk of losing the client. The risk is magnified when the firm does not have successors ready to step in. So, why isn't there more urgency in law firms about succession planning? We asked Phyllis Weiss Haserot, an expert on cross-generational issues in law firms, to comment.

Many firms focus business disruption planning on terrorism and technology risks. But severe disruption can occur whenever firms lose key players. Major rainmakers are clearly key players, though not the only ones. Firms need to be ready to replace them in many situations:

- Voluntary or involuntary retirement
- Partner defections for "a better platform" or to avoid demotions due to age
- Client dissatisfaction with their work
- The need to make room for the next generation to lead client relationships
- Death or disability. These situations may be unforeseen, but the disruption cost is mitigated if someone else is trained and can step in, even temporarily.

Without succession plans, business disruption is inevitable. Firms need to identify the people whose loss will cause disruption and assure that they have the bench strength to retain clients.

What are the best practices in succession planning? It is extremely important to align succession planning with the strategic focus of the firm and practice groups. To do so, it is critical to include all key stakeholders, including marketing, HR, professional development and lateral recruiting. Firms must think in generational terms, consider diversity, and address client needs and preferences. The human challenges in business continuity are the hardest, especially achieving multi-generational collaboration.

Many firms are not yet focused on the costs of losing large numbers of Baby Boomers who are seasoned, reliable, and have vast institutional knowledge. Often, firms focus on short-term economics. Achieving the crucial alignment among generations and firm objectives requires greater focus on people at all levels, ages and types of diversity. Firms must harness the wisdom and institutional memory of the senior leaders and capture the hearts and imagination of the best mid-level and junior-level people.

Succession planning should not be a top down activity run by management and seasoned professionals. The best planning is a continual process. One way to engage the younger generations is to meet periodically with associates and professional staff, invite questions, and listen to their input. By tapping into the collective wisdom at all levels, the leadership will learn how to make their firms more successful and which attributes to foster. The younger generations have the most at stake in creating a vision for the group and experience the world in different ways. By engaging with them, a firm is more likely to retain the best talent.

Partners and managers should be looking for future leaders. They need to encourage and allow junior people to volunteer for and take responsibility for significant internal projects which will let them prove themselves and become leaders.

Given the strong business case *for* client retention, talent retention and development, and the case *against* disruption, why are firms slow to do succession planning? Is it a lack of know-how? Lack of internal resources? Fear of dealing with sensitive issues and personalities? Or simply denial of the inevitable? Whatever the reason in your firm, the time to institute continuous and cross-generational succession planning linked to business development strategies is NOW!

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Phyllis Weiss Haserot, the President of [Practice Development Counsel](http://PracticeDevelopmentCounsel.com), is an expert on multi-generational workplaces and cross-generational collaboration to address knowledge transfer, succession planning, and attracting and retaining clients and employees of different generations. Her newest book is "You Can't Google it! The Compelling Case for Cross-Generational Conversation at Work." She can be reached at pwhaserot@pdcounsel.com.