



THE NEW ELLIS GROUP

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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The Importance of Utility Players

The pandemic has taught us many lessons but none more acutely than the importance of people being able to step up to meet gaps created when someone on the team has a family or medical emergency. Pre-pandemic, for a lawyer to have expertise in a “niche” was often a competitive advantage. Firms often encouraged lawyers to be the “go-to” lawyer in a particular specialty to fill a role on a team or meet certain kinds of client needs. It was standard practice for firms to highlight their well-oiled teams with many specialists who could seamlessly complete transactions or meet litigation deadlines. But in the pandemic, the lawyer equivalents of “utility players”, the athletes who are versatile and can play various positions, have assumed greater value. There have been so many pandemic circumstances in which “utility players” have been essential:

- When the lawyer assigned to a particular task got sick.
- When a member of the lawyer’s family got sick.
- When the lawyer’s schedule did not align with the client’s schedule for a key meeting or task.
- When a member of the team could not travel.
- When a team member was too stressed to be effective or meet a deadline.

What does it mean to be a “utility player” on a client team assigned to a particular project? First and foremost, it means someone who has their antennas out to identify crises being faced by other people on the team. Then it means someone who is willing and able to jump in and take over when confronted by the crisis facing another member of the team.

What are the qualities of “utility players”? They are smart, adaptable problem solvers who also have a lot of empathy, can act quickly and decisively, and are willing to take on more responsibility to get the job done. The pandemic has created many situations in which “utility players” became the glue that held together a team and enabled the firm to complete a transaction or meet a deadline.

Example: A firm made a relatively fast and effective transition in mid-March 2020 to working from home. One practice group, the labor and employment group, was immediately inundated with urgent requests from many firm clients on how to deal with pandemic-related issues in their workforces and workplaces. The head of the labor and employment group was also confronted by the risk of potential fragility on the part of some of the group’s lawyers. Medical emergencies and family issues like supervising children at home with no childcare created immediate threats to the firm’s being able to respond to urgent client requests. The practice group head anticipated the likelihood of emergencies and immediately polled each major client team to identify the people in each group who could be the “utility players” for the client team. The practice group leader asked lawyers who had the most versatility to step up to be ready to fill in when other lawyers were sidelined by health, stress, or family issues. One group of “utility players” were people who had joined the firm after working in-house because they tended to have broad experience. The practice group leader also reached out to a few recently retired partners to ask if they would be on-call to assist. The practice group leader also warned partners to be on alert for situations in which they needed to bail out a member of their team who faced a mental health or other crisis. The pandemic changed — for the better — the level of collaboration among lawyers in the group.

As the pandemic starts to wind down, will you remain more attuned to the importance of “utility players” and put more value on the people who can step in to get the job done?