

Business & Careers

Making the most of your career's middle years



Warren Smith
The Headhunter

I've often been asked what separates the leading partners in the market from the otherwise successful ones. Bear in mind, the "others" in this category are by most definitions highly successful practitioners in their own rights, so this question is typically about how the best-in-class do things differently that allow them to pull even further away from a group of highly successful practitioners in their respective firms.

Here are four ways in which the best lawyers pull further ahead mid-career.

They don't let up

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believe they have "arrived"—particularly once they have achieved equity partnership—the best recognize it's merely a checkpoint along a much longer career path. As they cement their position in the market, top practitioners continue to expand their networks, whether through speaking, writing, or engaging the market depending on what best suits their talents.

After many years of working to achieve recognition in the market (and at your firm), it may feel like you should now be able to take a bit more of a status quo approach,

but the best lawyers continue to expand their reach and emerge as one of a select few, best in class, in an already competitive market filled with successful practitioners.

They work smarter

Often, early success in practice is highlighted by a robust work ethic—a simple willingness to out-hustle peers in the marketplace. As your practice matures, it becomes equally important to learn which tasks matter most, which can be delegated, and candidly, which ones don't matter at all.

Again, while the temptation can be to simply tailor your practice to allow you to focus on only the most important matters, and use the newly found free time to allow for greater personal freedom, the best lawyers recognize this is simply a tool to allow them to better deploy their resources into the market. For the best, working smarter is a means to work more efficiently, while still applying the same level of effort that allowed them to achieve success in the first instance.

They augment their skills

While you may be approaching the apex of your legal skills insofar as your billable hours are concerned (and certainly, your clients will expect you to have achieved a high degree of skill to match your hourly rate), there are a myriad of skills which you can continue to augment in rounding out your profile in the market.

As you approach the middle stage of

your career, recognize there is still plenty of time ahead of you to optimize your skills. If public speaking is a challenge, it is not too late to take courses to shore up this area; similarly, if a deeper understanding of finances would improve your ability to advise your clients, there are courses available (MBA or otherwise) which could greatly augment your non-legal skills—taking them now still leaves you with multiple decades to employ them in furthering your practice in the market.

Recognizing that substantive skill development remains critical at this stage of one's career is another area which frequently separates the best from the merely good practitioners.

They give back

Finally, one of the areas which round out top practitioners is they invariably find a way to make a contribution back to the community. While some may cynically suggest this is simply another vehicle to further market their practice profile to a broader or non-traditional audience, what the best recognize is the act of contribution helps round out their profile and gives them a greater sense of satisfaction in their career.

In doing so, this helps give them a greater sense of purpose, which in turn allows them to remain deeply invested in all aspects of their career.

Overall, the key remains to recognize that while simply arriving at the mid-point of your career in private practice is clearly an accomplishment (especially given the high attrition rate), to continue to excel and go beyond requires focus and an understanding of how best to leverage your successes to date.

Warren Smith is managing partner of The Counsel Network, Canada's oldest and most respected lawyer recruitment and career consulting firms. He is also the first Canadian to be elected president of the National Association of Legal Search Consultants (NALSC), North America's leading legal recruitment industry association. You can follow him on twitter @lawheadhunter.

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Recruit: Put proper focus on transition

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of them of themselves. So, instead of hiring people with an intention to balance out strengths and weaknesses with new perspectives, backgrounds and ideas, they widen pre-existing gaps with individuals that tend to face similar limitations.

The good news is that there is a science to putting aside preconceptions. It involves deepening awareness of our subconscious biases, establishing a structured interview process that allows sufficient time to get to know the candidates, inviting several people to be interviewers and asking the same questions in all interviews.

Hiring for the right fit is certainly a great start to solidifying the team. But it's not enough. Even the right fit can get lost along the way without direction. So once

on board, attention should be placed on setting new hires up to succeed with career planning, performance management, mentoring, coaching and training.

While the focus is on the new hire (and rightly so), it's equally important to provide similar support to the rest of the team before, during and after such transitions. It may take a bit of time, and possibly when it's a scarce commodity, but it does wonders in terms of cultivating strength, stability and job satisfaction.

Sandra Bekhor, MBA, president of Bekhor Management, helps professionals build and enhance their practices, through marketing and management programs aligned with core strengths. She can be reached at sandrabekhor@bekhor.ca or 416-969-9600. For further information, visit www.bekhor.ca.