

Internal affairs

Nick Jarrett-Kerr explains why today's lawyers need an advanced set of life & business skills



and poverty? How many lawyers understand the psychological impact of redundancy, illness, marriage breakdown or bereavement? True client focus requires a wide range of insightful appreciation of what is going on in the world of the types of client with whom they regularly interact.

Value

Clients also want their lawyers to deliver value through efficiency and effectiveness.

Again, client surveys consistently highlight the need for competencies such as project management skills. These are skills which most accountants have for a long time received as part of their training but in which skills many solicitors are sadly lacking. Clients also want their lawyers to be cost-effective and attend to detail while refraining from over-lawyering. They want their matters actively and proactively managed so as to avoid wastage of time and duplication of effort. They want their lawyers to understand their needs and objectives and to define expected goals and outcomes from the start. They want to see improvements in their lawyers' ability to manage engagements within an overall budget and they expect to be immediately communicated of changes in scope, budget or time-lines. They want to see effective teamwork and delegation as well as a user-friendly approach and ease of access. All these requirements point to more than just legal and technical skills. Lawyers need to develop general management skills in project management, team management, economic and budgetary management, process streamlining, time management and communication.

What it all comes down to is that technical skills—save in cases of exceptional difficulty or complexity or in cases where the client's career or livelihood is at stake—are rapidly becoming a "given" for most clients who will assume of their chosen law firms an acceptable standard of expertise as the entry key to the client's door. To become any client's trusted and valued legal adviser needs not just legal excellence but an advanced set of life and business skills.

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There was a time, several decades ago, when solicitors were widely regarded—in what was then a male-dominated profession—as “men of affairs”, able to advise clients holistically on a wide range of their life, business and personal issues of which legal issues formed only one element. However, the mushroom-like growth of other professionals such as accountants, financial advisers, property experts, and wealth advisers steadily eroded the lawyer's position of influence all through the 20th century leaving solicitors in the UK as technical advisers at the tail end of transactions, and as the last port of call when all other efforts by other professionals to solve problems had failed. Regulatory protection in areas such as litigation

Additional skills

The secret is to understand what clients require from a lawyer in addition to technical skills. There have been scores of client surveys on the point and they all point to two overlapping areas of need namely the demonstration of exceptional client focus and the ability to provide good value. Exceptional client focus requires much more than competent and detailed lawyering. Clients will believe their lawyers to be client focused if the clients are made to feel that they come first, and that the lawyer understands their legal issues in the wider context of the clients' business or personal affairs. Client focus includes the ability to interpret legal needs in a commercial and practical context and also requires such attributes as excellent

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and probate helped to preserve the standing and the market position of law firms and at the same time a growing tide of legislation gave lawyers a technical stronghold from which to operate profitably and with the fearless independence which is the hallmark of the profession.

The problem was, however, that the loss of the lawyer's position of influence as a wide-ranging business and family adviser meant that many lawyers became deskilled in wider and worldlier areas of competence and ability. David Maister has pointed out several times in his many books including *The True Professional* that the antonym to the word “professional” is not “unprofessional” but “technician”. In other words a lawyer cannot become a true professional and his client's trusted adviser unless he has moved on from being a legal technician to someone with much more to offer.

communications, the preparedness to listen and a constant attentiveness and responsiveness. Focus requires personal rapport and close working relationships. Above all, it requires an undivided commitment—bordering on obsession—to the proactive achievement of goals.

All these attributes require the lawyer to get his out of the legal books and client files in which the lawyer can become buried and develop wider knowledge and greater insights. To understand the wider issues which face clients, lawyers need not just sympathetic ears but empathetic ones. How many lawyers regularly read such journals as the *Financial Times* and *The Economist*? How many business lawyers understand the career and commercial strains their clients are facing? How many lawyers can speak knowledgeably about their clients' businesses and even their hobbies? How many lawyers take the time to understand the human stresses of marriage, parenthood, old age