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Chapter 9

Innovation in Supporting Excellence — From Mentoring to Sponsorship, Coaching, and Beyond

by Ida O. Abbott and Jessica R. Natkin

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CHAPTER 9

Innovation in Supporting Excellence — From Mentoring to Sponsorship, Coaching, and Beyond

“The delicate balance of mentoring someone is not creating them in your own image, but giving them the opportunity to create themselves.”

— Steven Spielberg

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INTRODUCTION

Law firms are entirely dependent on the excellence of their lawyers. They require lawyers who are highly competent, behave responsibly and professionally, and are committed to the firm and each other. When these conditions exist, firms are more productive, profitable, and stable. Mentoring, sponsorship, and coaching help create these conditions by developing and maintaining the excellent lawyers law firms require. In order to support lawyer excellence in a rapidly changing profession, firms are embracing innovation in all of these fields.

Of the three, mentoring is the best known. Research has shown that mentors are key to career growth and success, especially for women and minority lawyers.¹ Early studies determined that mentors serve various functions that may be grouped into two principal categories: (a) *psychosocial functions*, which help mentees develop positive self-image, comfort, and behaviors in their professional role, and (b) *career functions*, which promote professional growth by teaching, coaching, providing needed information, and exercising leverage to help a mentee advance.² Career functions provide two distinct kinds of career help: *developmental* aspects that offer education, guidance, and advice, and *advancement* aspects that involve actively promoting a mentee’s career progression to higher levels of seniority and ultimately into partnership and leadership.

The classical image of a mentor embraced both developmental and advancement aspects of the career function: a well-established lawyer who took you under his wing, taught you how to be a professional, offered you contacts and clients, and groomed you for success. The mentor-mentee pair shared many characteristics and identified with each other professionally, personally, and socially, and their relationship was often profound and long-lasting. Such relationships typically arose as senior and junior lawyers worked together closely, and over time the mentor grew to see the junior as a protégé.

Sponsorship focuses attention more narrowly on the aspects of mentorship that deal with a protégé’s career advancement. Sponsors facilitate their protégé’s professional success by exercising their power or influence on the protégé’s behalf. In many cases, mentors who have sufficient clout transition seamlessly into becoming sponsors. Other sponsor-protégé relationships form specifically for career advancement purposes. Although sponsorship can be seen as the highest level on a mentoring continuum, mentoring today is considered to be primarily developmental in nature, while sponsorship is focused on power and promotions.

Coaching is also related to mentoring, but it has come into its own as a separate discipline. Coaching is a technique that helps lawyers deal with performance and goal setting. Rather than teach or advise as a mentor might do, coaches use a non-directive process to encourage individuals to identify issues, challenges, and options, then look inside themselves to find solutions and achieve desired results. Coaches use powerful questions to help individuals uncover desired goals, develop a plan to achieve those goals, and provide ongoing support while the plan is implemented. Specialized coaches, like business development or presentation coaches, have particular expertise that helps lawyers build on or improve the way they perform certain skills. Career coaches focus more on helping lawyers identify and work toward career goals. Hiring outside coaches to work with lawyers on performance and career planning is now common, and a growing number of law firms are hiring internal coaches to provide career development assistance.

The lines between mentoring, sponsoring, and coaching are fluid, and there are many areas where the three overlap. A summary comparison of mentors, sponsors, internal and external coaches is presented in **Table 1: Comparison of Mentors, Sponsors, Internal and External Coaches** below. What all have in common is a focus on professional learning and career development through individual and personal attention. That has been a key to the lasting power of mentoring over the centuries. Mentoring has special resonance for lawyers, whose professional development must in large part be experiential, ideally under the guidance of someone more experienced. This is as true for a new practice group leader taking on unfamiliar leadership challenges as it is for a new associate fresh from the bar exam. Today’s volatile and fast-changing legal world makes it challenging to provide lawyers with the intensive mentoring that would be ideal. So mentoring is adapting. Firms are updating established approaches and trying new mentoring models, shifting the emphasis for some mentors to sponsorship, embracing related disciplines like coaching, and showing readiness to seek new methods to give lawyers the individualized guidance and support they want and need.

Table 1: Comparison of Mentors, Sponsors, Internal and External Coaches³

	Mentor	Sponsor	Internal Coach	External Coach
Primary Function	Career Support	Career Advancement	Career Development	Career Support
Focus	Relational and career-oriented	Advocacy	Functional and results-oriented	Functional and results-oriented, often in specific subject matter
Audience	All lawyers	Attorneys chosen for advancement	All attorneys	High potential and under-performing lawyers

Scope	Professional development and advancement	Advance career interests	Goal achievement	Goal achievement
Unique Attributes	Attorney willing to model and transfer knowledge and skills	Internal attorney with power and influence	Trained coach with institutional knowledge and resources	Trained coach without potential firm bias

HOW MENTORING HELPS LAWYERS MAINTAIN PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE

Mentoring has always been integral to the legal profession, and its positive impact on lawyers’ career success is firmly established.⁴ It is the heart of the apprenticeship model by which lawyers prepared for and entered the profession. Although the apprenticeship model has faded into history, it is not extinct. For example, in California and a handful of other states, lawyers may still “read for the bar” under the personal tutelage and supervision of a practicing lawyer or judge.⁵

It is this highly personal nature that makes mentoring so powerful. Through their relationship and interactions, mentors can have enormous influence on the abilities, professionalism, and career progress of their mentees. As mentees’ competence and satisfaction grow, so does their engagement and commitment. Mentors also serve as role models, transmit firm culture, build loyalty, and groom the firm’s future leaders, further strengthening the firm’s stature and continuity.

The mentoring process focuses primarily on the development of mentees, but mentoring relationships are reciprocal. Mentors acquire new knowledge and perspectives, hone professional skills, and derive personal satisfaction as they help promising lawyers learn and grow. With a better understanding of how associates view their work and careers, mentors can be more capable managers and leaders. Good mentors can also attract and keep the excellent associates needed to provide high-quality service for clients. At a time when clients resist paying for associates, mentors whose associates are well prepared and fully engaged can demonstrate to clients that their associates add value to the team.

Not all mentors assist in the same way, nor can a single mentor provide all the assistance that a lawyer needs at different stages of a career. One result is that lawyers today are encouraged to have a personal “board” or “constellation” of mentors to provide a range of mentoring functions. Another result is that sponsors and coaches are taking on some of the functions that were previously within the realm of mentors.

WHY LAW FIRMS BEGAN TO FOCUS ON MENTORING

Law firms began to appreciate the importance of mentoring in the last quarter of the 20th century. When informal mentoring was common, lawyers were not conscious of

its importance; they took it for granted. It was when informal mentoring became scarce that they realized what they had lost. The trigger for this awareness was the stark rise in associate attrition. Many factors led to that attrition: law firm growth and expansion; increasing lawyer diversity; growing pressure for billable work that discouraged informal mentoring; and declining partnership possibilities. These developments caused attrition rates to climb, which became costly and disruptive for law firms and their clients.

- **Law firms grew and expanded.** As firms opened offices throughout the US and abroad, they hired more lawyers to staff them.⁶ Incoming associate classes expanded and became more diverse. When firms were small and growth was moderate, associates learned how to practice primarily through one-on-one experience with a senior lawyer. New lawyers learned on the job as they did client work under that lawyer's supervision, attended meetings and hearings, and observed the partners they worked with. Mentoring was a natural part of that process.

As firms expanded, they had to find ways to support associates' learning, development, and performance. They had to ensure that new lawyers in multiple jurisdictions nationally and sometimes world-wide were competent, productive, and able to provide a consistently high quality of client service. In addition to the geographical challenges, the increased size of entering classes meant that partners were expected to mentor significantly larger numbers of associates. Client teams became larger, so partners supervised many more associates than in the past and had less time to spend with each of them individually. This made it less likely that associates would work closely enough with a partner for a mentoring relationship to arise naturally.

- **Diverse lawyers were unable to find mentors.** In the past, most new lawyers were white men who came from the same class and social background as their mentors, which made their one-on-one arrangement comfortable. Then the lawyer profile changed. The number of women and minority lawyers entering law firms grew markedly. There were few women or minority partners to mentor them, and many white male partners felt uncomfortable and unprepared to engage in the kind of close cross-race and cross-gender professional relationships that are the hallmark of mentoring. So, diverse associates had special difficulty finding informal mentors.⁷
- **Economic pressures led to less mentoring.** Changes in the marketplace, which gave rise to a relentless and singular focus on profitability, discouraged partners from being mentors. The rising demand for legal services and pressure to increase profits led partners to redirect their priorities to pursuits linked directly to revenues. Billing became paramount and non-billable activities (like mentoring) were treated as secondary concerns, especially when clients refused to pay for associates' training time. Even those partners who enjoyed and valued mentoring came under pressure to bill more, which cut into their availability to teach and mentor associates.⁸

- **Partnership prospects declined.**⁹ Rates of elevation to partnership slowed as the pipeline narrowed, the track to partnership lengthened, and the requirements for partnership became more stringent. Partnership seemed out of reach for most associates. At the same time, partnership began to be less desirable. Associates saw that partners worked even harder than they did and were subject to many more demands, responsibilities, and risks.
- **Attrition soared.** The decline in mentoring meant that many associates did not receive essential work experience, learning opportunities, or guidance, and never became acculturated to the firm. This was particularly true for women and minority lawyers who saw few role models to whom they could relate. Associates began to view themselves as “free agents” rather than as future partners. They took a short-term view of their positions in a firm and were more inclined to leave for other firms and jobs. Many saw exciting opportunities in other industries and fields where law degrees were valued. This was compounded when economic downturns led to layoffs and a breakdown of trust between associates and firms, which in turn led to greater associate turnover. As a result, associate attrition grew alarmingly and became a costly and disruptive law firm phenomenon.¹⁰

Turnover rose during this period among partners as well.¹¹ Partners began to move laterally to other firms and workplaces, which further impeded mentoring. True mentoring relationships are based on trust and take time to develop. But often, just when a stable foundation was laid for a mentoring relationship, one of the pair would leave the firm. Sometimes the relationship continued, but usually it ended, leading to frustration and disappointment.

THE RISE OF FORMAL MENTORING PROGRAMS

The heightened awareness of the importance of mentoring, coupled with the decline in opportunities for it and the concomitant attrition, led firms to look for new ways to make mentoring more widely available. By the 1990s, a growing body of knowledge, evidence, and experience in multiple fields had established that mentoring is effective for retention, engagement, and achieving high professional performance.¹² Research on law firm associate attrition showed that one of the main reasons associates left law firms was the lack of mentoring.¹³ So firms started formal mentoring programs as a way to counteract the breakdown in naturally occurring mentoring relationships, improve morale and productivity, provide experiential learning opportunities for junior lawyers, and curtail the outflow of talent. These programs emphasized the firm’s commitment to developing and retaining associates, encouraged partners to show that commitment by mentoring associates, and provided all associates with structured developmental relationships that only some of them were able to find on their own.

Formal mentoring programs were intended to ensure that every associate had someone to

talk with, learn from, and seek guidance from. While admittedly less desirable or effective than organic mentoring relationships, these programs provided at least modest mentoring benefits for the lawyers who participated. Although most firms emphasized that these programs were intended to supplement, not supplant, informal mentoring, over time mentoring became associated in many lawyers' minds with formally assigned mentors. This is not surprising, since today 87 percent of law firms have mentoring programs of some kind.¹⁴

THE RISING INTEREST IN SPONSORSHIP

The notion of mentorship is ancient, while reference to sponsorship is relatively recent. It derives from the growing awareness that lawyers' career advancement requires more from mentors than advice and emotional support. It requires the proactive engagement and advocacy on the mentee's behalf that we now refer to as sponsorship.¹⁵

Sponsors are high-level advocates who use their power and influence to produce positive career results for the person they sponsor — the protégé. Sponsors invest heavily in their protégés' success by finding and creating opportunities for them, providing access to clients and important networks, advocating for their promotion, and grooming them for leadership. Because equity partners hold the power and leadership in law firms, and 82 percent of equity partners are men,¹⁶ most potential sponsors are men. And these men tend to sponsor other men, so most recipients of sponsorship are also men.¹⁷

Sponsorship becomes more important as lawyers rise in seniority, approach partnership, or are considered for leadership. Lack of sponsorship is a primary reason why women lag behind men in the top levels of leadership and power. This was the conclusion of several research studies published in the last few years.¹⁸ Researchers found that even women who had mentors did not enjoy the career advancement benefits that men garnered from their mentors. While mentors gave women developmental support, they did not offer women the active support required for career advancement — which the researchers labeled “sponsorship.” The studies also showed that when women had sponsors they advanced as quickly and as high in their organizations as men did. Unfortunately, however, women rarely had sponsors.

Law firms have begun to look at ways to correct this disparity by expanding sponsorship to women — and to minority lawyers as well, because other research has shown that minorities, too, lack sponsorship and are similarly disadvantaged in their career progress as a result.¹⁹ A 2014 survey found that very few law firms had initiated formal sponsorship programs but there was a great deal of interest in them.²⁰ Those firms that had started such programs were still in the very early stages.

THE RISE OF COACHING

Coaching is fairly new to law. Coaches were first used in the business world in the 1990s.²¹ A decade later, law firms started to make coaches available to partners to groom them for leadership, enhance their leadership and management skills, and become better

rainmakers.²² Firms turned to coaches for this help because leadership, management, and rainmaking were becoming increasingly important but were absent from most lawyers' skill set. Some partners also received remedial coaching to address undesirable behaviors, such as mistreating associates and staff, communicating poorly, or refusing to delegate work. Rarely, associates were offered external coaching to position them for partnership or to address performance concerns.²³

Coaching for associates became more common in the early 2000s. Associates' opportunities for hands-on learning and informal mentoring declined along with their chances of becoming a partner. Vocal associates began to let their law firms know that they wanted individualized support and career guidance. So firms began to look at career coaching as one way to provide what associates needed.²⁴

Law firms realized that career coaching programs could also help them achieve the "right retention," that is, engaging and retaining the associates who have long-term career prospects with the firm while helping those who are not succeeding to exit gracefully. Coaches ensure that high performers get the support they need to develop their strengths and remain sufficiently engaged to stay and make partner. Coaches also help steady, well-performing associates manage small hurdles in their development by addressing problems when they occur, guiding and acknowledging improvements, and providing encouragement. This enables the firm to retain good associates for a longer period of time. Of course some associates, either by their choice or the firm's, do not have long-term career prospects at the firm. Coaches help identify those associates earlier — and help them to determine what would be a better long-term fit for them and to seek out an appropriate next career step. This personalized attention lets them leave as a "friend of the firm," enabling the firm to retain a positive relationship with firm alumni and possible future clients.

Law firms today utilize both external and internal coaches. Whereas many firms retain outside coaches for targeted purposes (e.g., to aid in writing, speaking, or time management, or to modify behavior), others now hire in-house coaches as staff members. In 2004, Arnold & Porter LLP was the first firm to hire a staff member whose primary function was associate career coaching. A few months later Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati PC followed suit.²⁵ Within a short time, the number of internal coaches at law firms began to grow and the position of in-house legal career coach became established.

An effective internal career coach is often a former practicing attorney with a degree or certification in career counseling, coaching, or organizational development. The coach needs experience in designing and implementing individual attorney career and professional development plans, and needs to have superior communication and relationship skills. Internal coaches need to be allies of the associates they are working with in order to help them succeed in the firm. When an associate determines that he or she no longer wants to stay with the firm, the coach can help the associate leave on good terms. In addition, when an associate receives poor performance feedback or is told that he or she has no future at the firm, the coach helps the associate to digest that information and pursue a better career option. It is a nuanced position that requires the right fit in order for the coaching to succeed. See **Table 2: A Great Law Firm Internal Career Coach Checklist** for a description of a great law firm internal career coach.

Table 2: A Great Law Firm Internal Career Coach Checklist

- Establishes trust and rapport with a wide variety of attorneys
- Accepts attorneys as they come with unconditional positive regard
- Actively listens
- Asks powerful questions
- Reflects back, helping attorneys see their own solutions
- Challenges attorneys to set goals and holds them accountable for achieving them
- Keeps in mind the firm's goal to develop and retain attorneys

Other firms that recognize the value of coaching but choose not to hire internal coaching staff make external career coaches available for their associates. These outside coaches are available “on demand” by self-referred associates or associates for whom coaching is recommended (e.g., to improve time management skills). Some firms retain an outside consulting firm to provide such periodic coaching services.²⁶ Shearman & Sterling LLP was the leading firm to put together and pay for a panel of external coaches to whom associates had access for up to eight sessions.²⁷

Both the internal and external coaching models have pros and cons. Internal career coaches' conversations are confidential, but associates are sometimes skeptical that this can be enforced. An external consulting group or panel may give those associates a more secure feeling of confidentiality. However, an external coach may not be as effective at helping associates identify and navigate internal firm politics or guide them toward the right people in the firm who can help them. Also, internal coaches may find that knowing all the parties and the performance issues involved can unintentionally bias their coaching. Some firms address these concerns by offering a combination of options for both internal and external coaches. At Fenwick & West LLP associates can meet with an internal career coach and, at the same time, get referred to one of a panel of external career coaches the firm has retained. The case studies in **Table 3** provide some examples of how coaching success can be identified within agreed parameters, in this case retention, in a law firm.

The coaching field is gaining in credibility through an emerging body of research-based evidence supporting it as a discipline. Many coaches receive certification from the companies that train them. There are hundreds of coaching companies, but training standards vary, the field is unregulated, and there is no umbrella agency that accredits organizations certifying coaches.²⁸ In hiring internal or external coaches, certification is valuable but insufficient; firms should inquire in detail about the coach's training, experience, and approach. Just as important, however, is the coach's fit with the law firm culture. Coaches should be carefully interviewed to ensure that their style will be effective both for the individual lawyers with whom they are working and the firm.

Table 3: Case Studies: Real-life Success Stories in Career Coaching in Firms

<p>The Reinvention</p>	<p>An associate came to the career coach to explore the possibility of transferring departments and to learn the firm’s views on such a move. After discussing his reasons for desiring a transfer, the pros and cons, his professional interests, and his long-term career goals, the coach advised the associate to talk with the practice group leader of the new group as well as the leader of his current group. Throughout the process, the associate and coach had regular check-ins to strategize on how he would approach the partners and what he would say to make the transfer as smooth as possible. When both practice group leaders approved the transfer, the coach facilitated his communication with the chief professional development officer and the administrative departments that needed to be involved. With his ability to transfer smoothly, the firm was able to retain an engaged and committed associate.</p>
<p>The Smooth Departure</p>	<p>An associate did not see partnership as a viable option and her performance reviews confirmed she was correct. However, she was unsure of her next step. Using traditional career counseling assessments and techniques, the associate and coach worked together to explore what career options within the law might be best for her. She then researched possibilities and applied for new positions outside the firm. During this process, the associate and coach regularly checked in on her progress and worked together on her resume and cover letters. The associate departed the firm for an in-house position. During her exit interview, she had no negative comments about the firm and said that she would recommend it as a good place to work. By giving this associate the support to look at a career outside the firm and find her professional “best fit,” the firm allowed her to exit on good terms, and it retained a great relationship with the ex-employee/future client.</p>
<p>The Stretched Path to Partnership</p>	<p>An associate who was a star performer was having difficulty meeting the needs of her demanding practice and obligations outside of work. As an “A-Type” personality, it was difficult for her to say “no” to any requests from partners or clients. After discussing her career goals (to make partner) and her life goals (to have more time to devote to outside interests), the coach reviewed the firm’s reduced hours policy with the associate. In addition, the coach introduced the associate to other attorneys on reduced schedules so that she could learn about their experiences on reduced schedules at the firm. After exploring the options, the associate decided to request a reduced-hours schedule. She worked with the coach to prepare for the conversations where she would present the request to her supervising partners. When the associate’s request was approved, the coach worked with the appropriate administrative departments to set up the new schedule. The associate continued to see the coach on a weekly basis to work through issues with partners and to strategize how to protect her reduced schedule. The associate went on to have two children while an associate, remained on her reduced schedule, and made partner at the firm. By offering the associate support in dealing with workload issues, partner demands, and a schedule that better met her needs, the firm not only retained a high-performing associate (and avoided a burnout), but also gained a new partner able to act as a role model to others in the firm. This newly promoted partner later told the coach, “I would not still be here [at the firm] if it weren’t for you.”</p>

HOW MENTORING, SPONSORSHIP, AND COACHING LOOK NOW IN THE LEGAL SETTING

Mentoring remains an essential element of lawyers' professional development and lawyers still prefer informal mentoring. But today most law firms also have formal mentoring programs of some sort. These programs operate with varying degrees of success depending on many factors, including whether the compensation system rewards or undermines mentoring. Some firms are beginning to experiment with sponsorship programs and many have coaches on retainer or on staff.

I. Current Mentoring Models

The most common mentoring programs pair one senior mentor with one mentee in a one-on-one relationship. An example of such a program in a large, multi-office firm is Greenberg Traurig LLP's²⁹ "Associate Development Program" (ADP). The goal of the ADP is clear and straightforward: "to provide a comprehensive support system to enhance an Associate's career at GT." To achieve this, it assigns associates a Career Development Mentor (CDM or "Mentor"). Further support is provided by a Career Development Liaison (CDL or "Liaison") who manages the program in each office and acts as an advisor to Mentors and associates, and by an Associate Development Notebook that outlines the firm's expectations for the associate's development (including core competencies) and serves as a tool for the associate and mentor to use together. Roles and expectations are clearly spelled out along with detailed guidelines for program participation, and all participants receive or have access to numerous helpful resources. The firm's Attorney Professional Development team oversees the ADP but the Liaison manages the program locally. Liaisons receive special training and guidance, including a comprehensive "CDL Toolkit." Although local offices are expected to adhere to overall mentoring program goals, they adapt the program to suit the lawyers, practices, and circumstances in their offices. Special recognition is given to Mentors for excellence in mentoring and a "CDL of the Year Award" is bestowed on the Liaison who has been a "consummate teacher and trusted mentor" to firm associates.

While the one-on-one model remains prevalent in law firms, in recent years different models of mentoring programs have emerged:

- **Peer mentoring:** Instead of top-down mentoring where a senior lawyer mentors a junior, peer mentoring occurs between and among lawyers who are equal or close in terms of experience levels. Peer mentoring is used in many law schools to pair incoming students with second- or third-year students who can help them adjust to law school life and learning throughout the first year. And many law students informally form mentoring relationships with other students to help each other navigate the law school environment.³⁰
- **Group mentoring:** Instead of one-on-one mentoring, some firms match one or

two mentors with a small group of associates. Mentoring groups allow firms to leverage a limited number of mentors, give associates access to a larger number of lawyers in the firm, and enable mentors to share responsibility for leading mentoring activities. Group mentoring is often used by affinity groups and administered by diversity or professional development personnel. But practice groups, industry teams, or client teams sometimes use group mentoring to promote learning for a particular purpose (e.g., to familiarize participants with a specific industry, geographical region, or emerging area of law).

One New York law firm assigns two to three partners each year to serve as “class advisors” to all incoming associates in their practice group. The groups of new associates range from six to about eighteen depending on the practice area. The class advisors work with their group over several years. Their specific activities vary from group to group and can be quite far-reaching. They might lead discussions about work and substantive legal issues, offer associates practice and career advice, invite outside speakers to meet with their group, join with other groups for particular discussions or events, and generally engage their associates in both social and professional activities.

- **Mentoring circles:** Mentoring circles consist of lawyers who vary in terms of age, experience, roles, and status. Circles are a variation of group mentoring in which there are no designated mentors or mentees. Instead, participants take turns leading the group and serving as mentors, learning from each other as they explore shared interests. Mentoring circles are frequently used by women’s initiatives to bring women together for the purpose of strengthening internal networks, providing mutual support, expanding career advancement skills and strategies, and addressing issues of particular concern to women.

Weil Gotshal & Manges LLP³¹ supplements its associate mentoring program with mentoring circles for women associates, and intends to begin including male associates in the circles as well. Each mentoring circle is composed of a male and female partner of varying seniority and tenure, and five female associates of mixed class years. The circles give associates access to male and female partners as advisors and role models, and they foster peer and reciprocal mentoring.

- **Distance (or virtual) mentoring:** Traditional mentoring occurs in person, usually as people work together in the same office. Technology now allows mentoring to take place across great distances and multiple time zones, so mentor and mentee need not live or work anywhere near each other. At Perkins Coie LLP³², almost 10 percent of the firm’s 340 associates engage in distance mentoring. They are paired with partners in their practice groups but in a different firm office. These cross-office matches expand associates’ relationships across national practice groups and internal networks, and provide access to diverse mentors and development opportunities.

Distance mentoring programs allow paired mentors and mentees to talk “face to face” anywhere, anytime using Skype, Face Time, or the firm’s video systems. They can speak by phone or communicate in writing through written electronic media such as email or texting. Nonetheless, distance mentoring presents challenges that require the parties to be very clear and definite about how and when they will meet and communicate.

- **Upward or “reverse” mentoring:** Used primarily in corporate legal departments and businesses other than law firms, reverse mentoring pairs a junior person as mentor with an executive as mentee.³³ The purpose is to enhance interaction between partners and associates and also to encourage associates to share their perspectives and specialized knowledge with partners, especially in areas such as use of social media, where junior lawyers may have greater expertise than their seniors. It also promotes diversity and inclusion by educating partners and executives (who are predominantly white men) about the experience, ambitions, and thinking of women and minority associates.
- **Episodic mentoring:** Also called “situational” or “just in time” mentoring, this process involves a panel or group of people who agree to be available for questions and advice on an as-needed basis. Because no personal relationship may form between the mentors and the people they advise, this is arguably not mentoring at all. But it is an expedient way to help lawyers learn, develop, and start to build professional connections in a world where everyone is constantly on the move and few have time to form more profound mentoring relationships.

Dykema Gossett LLC³⁴ has added what it calls “Spot Mentoring” as a supplement to its existing mentoring program. Through this episodic mentoring feature, associates can meet and pose questions to a variety of senior lawyers throughout the firm as the need or interest arises. The firm’s intranet lists senior lawyers who volunteer to be “spot mentors,” available to talk with associates about designated topic categories (career development, legal practice skills, professionalism, practice development, and client service/management). Associates can search for a spot mentor by office, title, practice area, management role, and topic category, then reach out to initiate a conversation. The parties agree to speak in person, by phone, or electronically. There is no obligation beyond that one occasion, although some longer-term relationships may develop.

- **Mentoring for leadership:** Leadership development initiatives frequently pair experienced leaders as mentors to those who are being groomed for leadership.³⁵ While this is sometimes done as part of a program to prepare senior associates for partnership, some firms are pairing new or junior partners with senior partner-mentors (and often with outside coaches as well). Recognizing that transitions to partnership and new leadership positions bring new challenges, firms ensure that experienced firm leaders are available to help their partners adapt to their new roles and responsibilities.

Regardless of the format and configuration, a successful mentoring program must be carefully thought out, planned, implemented, and monitored. Whether a firm has 20 lawyers or 2,000, its mentoring program will face the same challenges: time constraints, competing priorities, loss of momentum, and lack of accountability. So in order to be effective, a law firm mentoring program must have clear objectives and program leaders or coordinators who are committed to building and maintaining the group's momentum. Every program design must have sufficient structure to support mentoring relationships and meet program goals, although a small or mid-sized firm may need less structure than a large one. Program designs also must be flexible enough to accommodate the personal needs and interests of participants and the specific circumstances of different practice groups and offices. In a large firm, it is important to provide a firm-wide framework with clear objectives and desired outcomes while allowing variability for local offices and groups.

II. New Legal Mentoring Organizations

The strong and widespread interest in mentoring for lawyers has led to the formation of organizations that promote, study, and support legal mentoring. The two leading organizations are the National Legal Mentoring Consortium (Consortium)³⁶ established in 2011, and the Institute of Mentoring,³⁷ which followed soon thereafter. The Consortium serves as a clearinghouse of information and resources for anyone interested or engaged in legal mentoring. Consortium members include program administrators, researchers, experts, and others who contribute to or share an interest in mentoring in the legal profession. The Consortium holds a national conference on legal mentoring every two years to promote the exchange of ideas and invigorate legal mentoring initiatives, programs, and activities.

Like the Consortium, the Institute of Mentoring promotes mentoring in the legal profession. However, the Institute focuses on research and training. It conducts research on best practices in legal mentoring, promotes thought leadership in legal mentoring through publications, offers training in mentoring skills, and provides guidance, resources, and advice about mentoring to law firms, law schools, and bar associations.

III. State Bar Mentoring Programs

In response to concerns about new lawyers' lack of preparation for law practice, more than 20 state bar associations and judiciaries have initiated state-wide mentoring programs as a way to ensure that new lawyers receive guidance from experienced practitioners on how to engage in law practice in accordance with the duties, responsibilities, and expectations of members of the legal profession.³⁸ In 2005, Georgia was the first state to adopt mandatory mentoring for all newly admitted lawyers, and state bar-sponsored mentoring programs have been gaining momentum since then. Five states have followed Georgia's lead by adopting mandatory mentoring programs and more than 15 states promote and support voluntary mentoring through programs that offer resources and matching services. Several other states are currently planning or studying bar-sponsored mentoring programs.

All state bar programs are intended to provide some degree of consistency and/or coordination of mentoring for novice practitioners.³⁹ They promote the development of competencies and behaviors necessary for responsible and effective law practice. Most importantly, they emphasize inculcating in new lawyers a high sense of professionalism, ethics, and civility. The underlying premise is that lawyers who receive this guidance during their first year in practice will develop skills, judgment, and good habits that will last throughout their careers.

The growth of state bar programs has produced a national “laboratory” where numerous approaches are being tried and tested. A number of states provide training in mentoring skills, and many allow new lawyers and mentors to receive MCLE credit for mentoring activities. Some state programs make use of new technologies to connect mentors and mentees, and some provide group mentoring as an alternative or supplement to one-on-one mentoring. Many state bar programs publish on their websites excellent program materials that they have developed, including guidelines and handbooks, definitions and explanations, mentoring plan templates, and checklists of activities.⁴⁰ In these and other ways, state bar associations are creating and supporting mentoring opportunities and practices throughout the profession.

IV. Current Sponsorship Models

Firms committed to expanding the benefits of sponsorship more widely are starting to explore — and some are establishing — formal sponsorship programs. Sponsorship programs are more challenging than mentoring programs. As lawyers climb through the ranks, the resources and positions are fewer, the competition is greater, and the stakes become higher. Sponsoring a lawyer for advancement therefore requires considerable time, trust, and willingness to take risks on his/her behalf.

An assigned partner who is willing to provide advice and career guidance as a mentor might balk at being asked to be a sponsor if it means grooming, advocating for, and proactively supporting someone for a partnership, bonus, or leadership role. Partners have limited political capital to expend on behalf of junior lawyers, and most will choose to sponsor those lawyers whom they know and trust to support their practices and clients. This is even more challenging in firms whose compensation systems reward only personal performance and client origination, and partners are unwilling to share access to clients, networks, and opportunities.

Moreover, not every junior lawyer may be suitable for sponsorship. Sponsors give their support to the most promising performers who have earned it. In the past, firms have been loath to differentiate among associates on the basis of performance or promise. Consequently, they have been reluctant to single out any associates for extra support like sponsorship. But the widespread use of competencies and progress levels, the application of rigorous talent management systems, and the need to leverage limited sponsor resources, has led to a discernible change in law firms’ attitudes and is making them more willing to implement sponsorship programs.

Some UK-based law firms have programs that assign partners to help a select group

of associates prepare for partnership. A few US firms are experimenting with programs aimed primarily at increasing sponsorship for women and minority lawyers. Examples of each are discussed below.

1. **Partnership Focus.** Global law firm Hogan Lovells LLP⁴¹ has a world-wide program called *Momentum* for associates on partner track. Practice groups identify certain senior associates as having high potential to become a partner and assign each one an external coach and a partner in the practice group who serves as their “supporting partner.” The associates participate in a series of exercises and discussions that are related to success as a partner, and they are observed and given feedback by other partners in the group. Using that feedback and the discussions that take place during the program, the associate and coach create a development plan for the associate that outlines strengths, development areas, and experience targets. The supporting partner provides guidance around the development plan until the associate is eligible for partnership, which is, on average, about 1.5 to 2 years later. Supporting partners embrace this role because the designated associates are high-potential performers who may become future leaders in the firm. Not all associates selected for the program become partners, but all enjoy significant career advancing benefits from the experience.

2. **Diversity Focus.** Littler Mendelson P.C.⁴² launched its Career Advocacy Program (CAP) in 2012 to help develop, retain, and advance more women and minority associates. The CAP matches women, minority, disabled, and self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) associates (“Protégés”) with shareholders (“Advocates”). Protégés are associates at experience Level 3 out of 4 (generally in their fourth to fifth year of practice) and are among the highest performing associates (rated at least a 7 out of 10 on performance evaluations). Advocates include some of the firm’s most prominent and influential leaders, including board members, the firm chair, practice group chairs, a former managing director, and top rainmakers. Protégés and Advocates meet twice annually, while also maintaining regular contact by phone and email. The Advocates meet separately as a group once a year to compare notes regarding the Protégés’ progress and share ideas for enhancing the program. In addition, General Counsel from several firm clients (“Champions”) meet in person once a year with small groups of Protégés to offer their career perspectives, advice, and support.

COACHING FUNCTIONS

The majority of law firms in the U.S. today employ a competency-based talent management framework.⁴³ A competency framework requires a well-developed career development program, including written and clearly described core competencies, performance evaluations tied to the competencies, development planning with competency-based goals, and mentoring support. In a well-designed competency model, where performance expectations and evaluation measures are spelled out with specificity,

coaches can serve many career support functions in lieu of or in addition to being mentors. With or without a competency model, coaches can perform a multitude of varied services, including:

- **Career Planning and Goal Setting:** Coaches help associates establish and work toward career goals. The coach helps associates understand the firm's competencies or skill sets, which establish expectations for legal skills, client relationships, business development, practice management, leadership, and firm citizenship at different experience levels. Coaches then help associates determine particular competencies to enhance or improve and set goals toward that end. The coach may also explore the associates' professional and personal aspirations, which may be reflected in those goals. This can be focused on enhancing the associates' strengths, helping them develop their expertise, or addressing areas where the associates need to grow. The goals may be incorporated into an associate development plan. Setting and achieving goals not only gives associates a sense of accomplishment, but also helps them work toward partnership or other attractive career options.

Coaches can use the same goal-setting process for laterals and lawyers returning from leaves of absence. They can meet with each incoming lateral one-on-one (for an "entrance interview"), identify challenges and aspirations, suggest people the lateral should meet to build their practice, and make appropriate introductions. Similarly, the coach can help associates returning from leaves of absence to transition back into practice. Coaches often help associates returning from parenting or medical leave to deal with flexible schedules and work-life challenges.

- **Troubleshooting:** Coaches help counsel associates on problems involving work relationships, office politics, and navigating firm policies, procedures, and resources. This may include helping associates deal with time management, stress reduction, and the firm's work assignment system (or lack thereof), as they struggle to maintain the "right" workload (i.e., avoiding either too much or too little work) and obtain the "right" experience.
- **Career Alternatives:** Coaches often provide self-assessment tools to help associates evaluate their career paths and objectives. If an associate's goals no longer align with the firm's, coaches help the associate explore other career options inside and outside the firm, including jobs with firm clients. Giving associates the power to explore alternatives often helps them realize they want to stay at the firm long-term. If they do not, they are more likely to leave on a cordial basis and possibly become a client or referral source.
- **Life Coaching:** Work does not happen in a vacuum. With work and personal life increasingly flowing together, coaches help associates set personal goals to reduce work-life conflict. Coaches help associates to find ways to resolve or strategize about personal issues that impact work, and work issues that impact their personal lives, so they can be less stressed, more productive, and happier.

- **Outplacement Coaching:** When associates are put on probation or terminated from the firm due to poor performance or reduction in force, coaches can guide them through a career counseling process of self-assessment, researching career possibilities, and job search.⁴⁴ Coaches may also review resumes and cover letters.
- **Performance Review Counseling:** Coaches help associates digest, interpret, and act upon the feedback presented in performance reviews. Review counseling helps associates use the feedback to set goals and plans that will foster development in the areas named in the review. This can include both enhancing strengths and improving in problem areas.
- **Business Development:** Coaches assist associates in setting and achieving appropriate business development goals. They monitor and support associates' progress during execution of the business development plan and hold associates accountable for achieving their goals within a specified time frame. This includes, e.g., working with associates on creating a “hot prospects” list of current or potential clients and determining ways to cultivate those relationships.

I. Examples of Comprehensive Coaching Models

In-house coaching at law firms tends to focus on fostering lawyers' career development and satisfaction. Here are two models that use different approaches to achieve that end and incorporate a number of the coaching functions detailed earlier.

- Fenwick & West LLP has a dedicated coach — an “Associate Guide” — for its first-year class.⁴⁵ The Associate Guide meets with each first-year associate individually twice a month to discuss their workload, assignments, and any problems they are having. The Associate Guide seeks out skill-building work opportunities and stretch assignments for them and closely monitors their performance by analyzing their billable hours reports and discussing current projects with them. The Associate Guide's communications with the associates are confidential, so the Associate Guide is better able to help them deal with any concerns and insecurities they might have. The Associate Guide helps associates learn to manage their workload and also helps the firm manage associate utilization by pointing out uneven associate workflow to partners. This prevents underworked associates from falling through the cracks and overworked associates from burning out.
- Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP has six internal career coaches who are made available to its associates and counsel.⁴⁶ These coaches are professional development personnel and office administrators who provide coaching in addition to their other work responsibilities. Each year, the coaching is specifically offered to one class of associates. All associates in the class are required to attend one introductory session in which the coach explains how coaching works and what is on offer. Working with a coach is completely voluntary. Those associates who take up the option may have multiple coaching sessions to work on any

career issues they choose, on a confidential basis, typically with a coach located in a different office than their own. In addition, a senior partner who has become an executive coach now serves as a coach to the firm's newly promoted partners.

FUTURE TRENDS AND PREDICTIONS IN MENTORING, SPONSORSHIP, AND COACHING

The legal profession is undergoing profound and rapid changes, but mentoring, sponsorship, and coaching will remain integral to the professional growth and development of lawyers in the future. Although law firms tend to devote fewer resources to mentoring and more to learning programs, especially computer-based learning, what junior lawyers want is mentoring and on-the-job training.⁴⁷ Young lawyers today are earnest and blunt about their need to feel valued and be meaningful workplace contributors.⁴⁸ They want to feel a sense of inclusion in their firms. They need and want personal, customized attention for their learning, development, and career growth, as well as exposure to role models and exemplars of proper professional behavior.⁴⁹ After all, novices become capable and responsible practitioners only through experience, observation, and input from those more knowledgeable. Lawyers have less time and appetite for formal learning programs but a strong desire and need for personal supervision, attention, and guidance. These are classic mentoring functions.

Nonetheless, there will be changes and adaptations in mentoring, sponsorship, and coaching. Some examples of what to expect include:

- **Boundaries between mentoring and coaching will continue to blur.** While mentoring and coaching are distinct processes, the boundaries between them are fluid and they overlap in significant ways. For example, mentors are usually lawyers in the same firm or other organizations whose experience and expertise is the source of their advice and support. Many use questioning, goal setting, and other coaching techniques when working with mentees. In addition, mentors who are influential in the firm may become advocates and sponsors.

While outside career coaches adhere to non-directive coaching techniques (i.e., asking questions rather than giving advice or instruction), in-house coaches tend to be familiar with organizational culture and professional standards, and many take a more active guiding role than is usually associated with coaching. They are able to offer advice and counsel about firm politics and personalities, as well as to assist with career advancement strategies. So their roles increasingly overlap and blur with those of mentors.

Notwithstanding this blending of functions, in-house coaches will remain limited in certain critical ways. Mentors can supervise associates' work and provide real-time teaching, feedback, and guidance, while that is outside the scope of a

career coach's role. More significantly, internal coaches can help develop career advancement strategies, but they do not have the power to influence partnership, leadership, or compensation decisions, or to create the conditions that advance a lawyer's career.

- **Coaching will gain increased prominence.** Internal career coaches will become a more deliberative and integral part of attorney career development and will be further integrated into competency frameworks. Coaches will not replace mentors. Instead, they will work collaboratively with mentors and offer a more well-rounded and comprehensive professional development experience for the associate. Coaches will assume many mentoring activities and have more time than partners to spend on them. For example, coaches will seek appropriate work opportunities for associates in order to help them obtain the developmental experiences they need and will keep the mentor informed of the associate's progress. The mentor will supervise, observe, or review the work and give the associate advice and feedback, which the associate will apply to development goals with the help of the coach.
- **Mentoring will become more professional.** Unlike the field of coaching, which is highly commercialized, there is little financial incentive to standardize or certify mentoring skills, since mentors are unpaid. But we may soon see professionally trained and certified mentors and mentor program managers. The move to professionalize mentoring is making strides in Europe, where the effort began. The International Standards for Mentoring Programmes in Employment (ISMPE)⁵⁰ was launched in 2003 to support the maintenance and development of effective mentoring within the workplace and the broader work environment. The Institute of Mentoring is working with the European Mentoring and Coaching Council to develop mentor training program standards and a certification process for legal mentors (and at some point for legal mentoring program managers).⁵¹ We can expect to see more research-based evidence in this field, as we have seen in coaching. But even without professional standards, the importance of mentoring skills will become more apparent and they will be included in core competencies and learning programs for lawyers, both in law firms and in bar association-sponsored programs.
- **Innovative mentoring models will proliferate.** Young lawyers believe that everyone has something to learn and something to teach, and that learning should occur anytime, anywhere. As lawyers increasingly work across time zones and geographic boundaries, and digital learning tools become ubiquitous, lawyers find customary training and development frustratingly slow and inconvenient. They want alternatives to the traditional top-down, one-on-one model in mentoring programs where matches are often disappointing. In the future, various mentoring components and approaches will be combined, often supported by social media and other forms of technology, into new models that will overcome their impatience and frustration. Much of the innovation will come from law schools

and state bar programs, which will be driven by the need to ensure that large numbers of new lawyers are better prepared to practice according to professional standards in terms of competence, management, service, and ethics.

Within a firm or organization, dedicated sites on firm intranets will provide mentoring opportunities for lawyers interested in particular clients, issues, or subjects. People will be matched (or, more likely, will self-match) on a continuing or as-needed basis. It will be easier for lawyers to develop mentoring networks with one or two mentors offering long-term or leadership support while other mentors will assist with short-term goals or immediate issues. The duration, focus, and closeness of each relationship will depend on each mentor's role in the network.

- **Mentorship and sponsorship will target high-potential lawyers.** Law firms will identify earlier the high-performing mid-level and senior associates (especially women and minority associates) who are partnership candidates and ensure that they have mentors and sponsors to support and guide their development. The challenge for firms will be to determine the nature of mentoring they will provide for associates who are not targeted for partnership but are expected to remain in the firm long term. Those lawyers will need to meet the firm's standards of excellence, so skills-focused mentoring will remain important and available. Career-focused mentoring may be more limited, however, and will be provided primarily by senior lawyers in the firm who have succeeded in alternative career tracks, as well as internal and/or external career coaches.
- **Mentoring will expand to experienced lawyers.** Mentoring will also be seen as valuable for sustaining the motivation, focus, and drive of high-performing partners, not just associates. We are likely to see firms give more attention to mentoring for junior partners transitioning into non-equity and then equity partnership; leader-to-leader mentoring for partners assuming new leadership roles or retiring from practice; and client- and team-based group mentoring. Clients will be included in law firm mentoring programs, both as mentees and mentors.
- **Mentoring and coaching will become available to firm leaders who are not lawyers.** Many important high-level law firm leaders and managers will not be lawyers. As the demand for these executive level employees continues to grow, firms will offer career support through mentoring programs and coaching services in order to attract and retain top talent.
- **Mentoring, coaching, and sponsorship programs will improve through the use of data.** By collecting, analyzing, and applying empirical and survey data about the parties involved (e.g., their professional interests, career goals, communication styles) and their experiences in mentoring, coaching, and sponsorship programs, firms will make more effective matches, assess their programs more rigorously, and improve them continuously.

- **Sponsorship will become available to underrepresented lawyers.** As firms learn more about the crucial importance of sponsorship in career advancement and diversity, they will make greater efforts to provide sponsorship opportunities for women and minority lawyers who have previously been left out. Firms will use a variety of approaches, including education, reminders, incentives, and formal programs, to accomplish this. More men in leadership positions will step up to ensure this happens and to hold the firm accountable.
- **Mentoring programs will spread world-wide.** Through multinational firms and international legal organizations, structured mentoring programs are moving into developing nations. Organizations that appreciate the value and importance of mentoring for lawyers are carrying the process to lawyers around the world. Two examples:
 - The International Bar Association (IBA)⁵² matches new law firm leaders who have little preparation or guidance in how to run a law firm with experienced firm leaders in other countries who serve as mentors. These mentors help new law leaders acquire management knowledge and skills and start to build a world-wide network of professional connections. The IBA matches the mentoring pairs and provides an online database of resources to assist in the mentoring process.
 - The Cyrus R. Vance Center for International Justice's Women in the Profession Program⁵³ seeks to increase the representation of women in the legal profession across the Americas. They recently launched an innovative mentoring initiative for Mexican women lawyers. Developed along with leaders of international and Mexican corporate legal departments and law firms, the mentoring initiative is pairing senior lawyers at corporations and law firms in Mexico with junior lawyers across organizations.

CONCLUSION

The legal profession is undergoing significant changes that are transforming lawyers' roles and careers. Law practice in the future may look very different from what it is today, but whatever changes occur, the need for personalized hands-on learning and development will remain essential for lawyers who represent, advise, and advocate for clients. It will also be imperative for those who will manage and lead law firms and other organizations that employ lawyers. Mentoring, sponsorship, and coaching will therefore continue to be key processes by which lawyers learn and maintain excellence in performance, professionalism, management, and leadership. Specific methods and models will adapt to changing conditions, but the underlying principles of individualized attention to lawyers' growth and learning will remain relevant, strong, and more necessary than ever.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Ida O. Abbott, President of Ida Abbott Consulting, has been helping employers manage, develop, and retain legal talent since 1995. She also serves as a mentor and coach to high-performing individuals seeking professional success. Before starting her consulting practice, Ida was a trial lawyer for 20 years.

An elected Fellow of the College of Law Practice Management, Ida has long been a leader in the field of lawyers' professional development. She is Vice-Chair of the California State Bar Mentoring Task Force, on the Executive Committee of the National Legal Mentoring Consortium, an Advisor to the Institute of Mentoring, a founding member of the Professional Development Consortium, and leader of the Professional Development Roundtable for Global Law Firms. Through the American Bar Association's Rule of Law Initiative, Ida is helping lawyers from the Middle East design and implement a mentoring program for criminal defense lawyers in their country. She is also a mentor in Law Without Walls, a unique world-wide law school program focusing on law, business, and innovation.

Ida has also been in the forefront of efforts to advance women in the legal profession. She is co-founder of the Hastings Leadership Academy for Women at Hastings College of the Law, where she is a Faculty Fellow, was the founding chair of Women in Law Empowerment Forum (WILEF) in the San Francisco Bay Area, and operates the Women Leaders Roundtable.

A prolific author, Ida's books include *Sponsoring Women: What Men Need to Know*, *Women on Top: The Woman's Guide to Leadership and Power in Law Firms*, *Lawyers' Professional Development: The Legal Employer's Comprehensive Guide, 2nd Edition*, and *The Lawyer's Guide to Mentoring*. Her newsletter, *Management Solutions*, is available on her website, www.IdaAbbott.com.



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Jessica is an expert in the fields of lawyer career development and work/life integration, as well as in the design of customized work schedules that match the needs of attorneys to the needs of their firms and clients. Jessica holds both a law degree from Northwestern University School of Law as well as a graduate certificate in career development. She has been a career coach for lawyers for more than 15 years. Prior to joining Fenwick, she was the Director of Programs for the Project for Attorney Retention, and she managed the career development programs at Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP and Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, P.C.

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