

What Firms Can Do to Help Associates Take Responsibility for Their Careers

by Amy Sladczyk Hancock and Cordell Parvin

Isn't it ironic that many lawyers spend more time and energy planning their vacations than they do planning their careers? Isn't it also ironic that, when asked, they can explain clearly why they want to go to a particular vacation spot, what they need to do to get adequately prepared for their upcoming trip, and exactly what they plan to do while there? However, when polled about their very own careers, they usually have not written any plans, goals, or "itineraries" — and when asked what they *really* want to accomplish professionally their answers are non-descript, fuzzy, and often just downright ambiguous. Why is this, and what, as legal and professional development administrators, can we do to help?

Author John M. Richardson, Jr., has an expression: "When it comes to the future, there are three kinds of people: those who let it happen; those who make it happen; and those who wonder what happened." Many young lawyers seem reluctant to "make it happen" by taking responsibility for their own career success and happiness. In many cases they know how to please others, including their supervising attorneys and more senior lawyers, parents, teachers, professors, and bar examiners, but they have given little thought to what *they* actually want — the

ever-important "how-to-please themselves" inquiry. They have had a single, focused goal for many years leading up to their legal practice — to achieve high enough grades to get a job with the firm, company, or agency of their choice — and have not invested the time and thought necessary to focus on what they want in and from their career once they finally *do* land that coveted job.

Legal and professional development administrators must play a critical role in helping the attorneys in our firms "make it happen," and, in order to do this successfully, we have to investigate and understand the many reasons it doesn't happen naturally and with ease in the first place.

Associates fail to set goals and devise career development plans to achieve those goals because they are often already overwhelmed by their heavy day-to-day workloads and choose not to further burden themselves by devoting additional time to planning or investing in their own careers. These associates find it difficult to think long-term when buried at work in high-pressure environments.

Other associates do not see the value of setting goals. They look at senior lawyers in their sections/firms who have never been known to set goals and think those lawyers are doing well (enough). Those associates are unable to see how they will benefit from personal and professional goal setting and avoid doing so.

Finally, there is the group of associates who view work to be just that — work. They do not think about their job in terms of a career, so there is little reason to set goals applicable to advancing it. Many do not want to become a partner or may not even want to practice law over the long term; therefore, no matter how much coaching or training these associates receive, they are unlikely to see the value of setting goals and planning career strategies and are not going to do so, despite our best and most dedicated efforts to encourage them otherwise.

When you poll your firm's associates, you may find additional reasons why they are not currently engaged in setting goals for themselves or do not recognize the benefits of doing so. It is important in designing your firm's career development curriculum that it address and attack many, if not all, of the reasons you gather from associates for why they don't participate in their own career planning and development.

What *specifically* should you and your firm do to encourage career planning?

Make sure there is an alignment of leadership, purposes, strategy, core values, culture, and systems that includes goal setting. If the leadership of your firm does not support this, it is not part of their own strategic development plan, or it is contrary to the firm's culture, career planning for associates is not likely to be embraced or to occur.

If alignment does exist, it is necessary to communicate the message that the firm values associate professional development and the associates' investments in their career goals and to persuade associates that they are at best limiting their careers by failing to invest non-billable time in themselves. Repeat this message loudly and often!

Carve out time in your professional development curriculum to plan and goal-set with the associates and make sure they know that YOU are an asset and resource to utilize throughout this important process. You will be able to motivate, energize, and reach associates once you get to know them individually and build their trust in you. This is a "contact" sport of sorts and should include —

- Getting to know each associate, and asking them some simple questions: If time were not an issue, what would you really want in your career? or Why did you want to become a lawyer in the first

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place? When you have answers to those kinds of questions, you are ready to help them carve out and set their goals.

- Asking them to identify and describe what is most important in their lives and in their careers.
- Helping them to establish goals centered on what is important to them, AND to the firm.
- Brainstorming with them about what *specifically* they must do to achieve each professional/personal goal and including these ideas in the strategic plans devised.
- Assisting them with the actual physical preparation of a "Personal Development

and Performance Plan" to achieve their goals. The plans should vary in accordance with the associate's class level/year, and they should align with the benchmarking and core competencies already established in your firm when at all possible.

- Monitoring their performances and keeping the associates accountable or on-track in regard to their respective goals. This follow-up is important because it can provide motivation, inspiration, and a friendly reminder of sorts. As David Maister has said, "Once a person has announced his or her goals to another person, the other

person has 'nagging rights.'" Regularly checking in with associates about their progress lets them know you believe in their goals, want to keep helping them, and will continually encourage them to do their best in striving for and eventually accomplishing those goals.

- Providing constructive feedback and alternative suggestions as often as necessary along the way.

Happy goal setting and good luck! ■

In the Public Interest ...

by Marnie L. Glaeberman

It's my pleasure as Director of Public Service Initiatives to have this forum to share news and ideas in public interest and public service careers. As always, your feedback and suggestions for future topics are welcome at marnie@nalp.org. I'm delighted to update you on the many exciting happenings this fall here at NALP's PSLawNet.

First, a million thanks to our PSLawNet Fellow, Abby Smith, whose efforts have made all of our recent endeavors go so smoothly. An additional warm welcome is extended to our new "class" of work-study program assistants, composed of both undergraduates and law students from the DC area, who help keep our listings of public interest opportunities current and continue to verify and update the thousands of organizational profiles in the PSLawNet database.

Second, I'm pleased to report that the October 27th NALP/PSLawNet **Public Service MiniConference** was a resounding success. With nearly 100 in attendance, the expert panels drew considerable positive feedback. We would also like to commend the student winners and "honorable mentions" of this year's PSLawNet Pro Bono Publico Awards, recognized at the MiniConference Luncheon. This year saw a record number of nominees, all of whom clearly have strong commitments to public interest law.

Following the MiniConference, representatives of NALP's Public Service Committee and I served as panelists and facilitators in several sessions at the Equal Justice Works Career Fair and Conference. I'm looking forward to continuing to forge and strengthen our ties with EJW and other public interest legal organizations in the coming year.

Finally, with eager anticipation we announce the newly redesigned and upgraded NALP's PSLawNet web site. A result of intensive collaboration of NALP staff and web design consultants, with invaluable input from employer, school, and student users, the new web site features an updated look and feel, along with improved search functions to streamline the process of posting and searching for opportunities. We will be adding new content regularly, and encourage everyone to visit the site, still at www.pslawnet.org, and let us know what you think.

PSLawNet Employer Spotlight on ...

Based in Chicago, the Midwest Immigrant and Human Rights Center (MIHRC) is a division of The Heartland Alliance. MIHRC provides immigration assistance, deportation defense, and asylum representation for low-income immigrants, refugees and victims of human trafficking from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and Europe. In order to protect abused, neglected, and abandoned immigrant

children, MIHRC also provides access to a special immigrant juvenile visa for some of their youngest clients. One of the leading asylum defense programs in the country, MIHRC relies extensively on volunteer attorneys. MIHRC has helped thousands of immigrants and refugees from more than 45 nations begin new lives in the United States and has become a national model for legal clinics providing immigrant and refugee legal services.

MIHRC's most recent posting on PSLawNet in September was for a staff attorney. MIHRC also participates in the Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI) Graduate Fellowship Program for recent law graduates joining Chicago law firms. Participating firms sponsor incoming associates to work as Fellows at public interest agencies like MIHRC while they study for the bar exam. PILI Fellows at MIHRC work closely with the diverse immigrant community in Chicago, representing people in deportation hearings and appeals, immigrant visa petitions, and other matters.

Did you know?

During the month of September 2004 alone, the PSLawNet database added:

- 228 new opportunities in legal and law-related public interest, and
- 1,019 newly registered law students and grads using the site. ■