



# 7 THINGS YOUR ASSOCIATES WOULD CHANGE ABOUT YOUR FIRM

**By Sue-Ella Prodonovich**

If your Associates had the chance, they'd probably change a lot about your firm - especially when it comes to the way you're helping - or not helping them - develop their careers. And I think they are onto something.

After all, whether you're in accounting, law, architecture, engineering or any other profession, how well your early career professionals perform will go a long way to determining how well your business performs. And yet, too often I see firms do the wrong thing by their Associates - even if they don't intend to.

If you need some ideas on how to build a team of happy, productive Associates, here are seven easy ways. And, best of all, they come straight from the horses' mouths. Each idea was volunteered at a talk I gave in Melbourne (before Covid) with participants from AECOM, Woods Bagot, Hebert Smith Freehills, Minter Ellison, Corrs Chambers Westgarth, DLA Piper, McGrathNicol, Hall & Wilcox, Colin Biggers & Paisley, Clayton Utz and Phillips Ormonde Fitzpatrick.

## 1. TAKE THEM TO MEETINGS

How often do you take junior professionals along to meetings? I'm not talking about the kind of ones where you have them sitting there, taking notes for the work you're then going to pile them up with. I mean the background meetings - the big picture ones, where ideas are kicked around, important schemes are hatched and strategic decisions are made?

If the answer is not often, stop what you're doing now and start inviting them along. Because, if you want to keep your Associates engaged and productive and working for the greater good, they need to be able to put the work they're doing into context.

Oh, and if you're worried about clients concerns over ballooning bills, here's a tip: don't charge for the junior's time. (And let them know you won't be billing them ahead of the meeting).

## 2. TELL THEM HOW YOU DID IT

If Associates ever hope to build their own practice, they need to have an example of how others have done it before. So let them know how you built your own client base. Were they contacts you were introduced to through business? Were they university or school friends? Did you share a mutual interest or background?

And most importantly how did they go from contacts to clients?

Professional services remains a people game, so knowing how relationships are forged is a vital piece of information for any junior hoping to build their career.

### 3. INTRODUCE AN APPRENTICE MODEL

The best way to learn any craft is by observing the Masters up close. That's because you won't just pick up how to do something, you'll also pick up the less concrete but equally important skills, such as the subtleties of how to behave and the questions to manage others.

That's one of the reasons the apprenticeship model developed in the trades. It's also why, when you go to see your GP, they'll often have a student or inexperienced doctor sitting with them and observing how they interact with you.

So why not introduce a similar model in your firm? Give all of your juniors some time each week where they follow a senior professional around and just observe. Then watch how quickly they start picking up the nuances of their role and, in turn, begin contributing to your practice in a more meaningful way.

### 4. BUILD A SAFE SPACE

Young professionals want to know so many things and it's vital that they're able to ask them. But they're also very conscious about looking stupid. So build a 'safe' training environment where they can be free to ask whatever they want, without having their thoughts scrutinised by decision makers. While you're at it, give them a training budget and make sure they spend it. Let them use platforms such as [General Assembly](#) and [Meetup](#) that let them build their skills and networks away from critical partners' eyes.

### 5. BACK THEM UP

Nothing will make a young professional more confident and more willing to go the extra mile than knowing you have their back. And, for me, nothing shows you're willing to look out for someone more than letting them initiate a project or get involved in the fun, non-billable stuff.

For instance, if you have a new project or you're heading in a new direction, involve your Associates in the decision making. And, when you do, use the ones you value most - not the ones whose time you're happy to write off. It will lead to better results for you, as well as for them.

### 6. LET THEM THROW A PARTY

For new professionals, one of the hardest things about building a practice can be knowing where to start. So, make the first step easy for them by letting them host their own networking event. It could be something as simple as a games night with pizza - it doesn't have to be a blow out. But they should have some kind of budget so they don't feel like they're coming cap in hand.

Then give them the authority to invite the people they want to: other early stage professionals who could be the ones to grow with them over their careers. Alternatively, let them put on a training course for their peers. Don't always make it about the partners. And finish the event with drinks so they get to have some fun.

### 7. TELL THEM YOUR STORIES

Again, this goes back to the whole context thing. Every one of your staff should know not just what you do but why you do it. In other words, indoctrinate your people in your firm's history and give them the interesting stories (not just the elevator spiel) to tell so they go into the world knowing what they're part of.

Tell them about your hero projects and why you're proud of them and how you're making a difference in the world. Then watch how they become evangelists for your firm wherever they go.

### **AND FINALLY...**

Your Associates should be the engine room of your firm. But that doesn't mean squeezing every last billable hour from them and **treating them as a resource (not a human)**. Instead, show them the ropes and give them the chance to blossom.

If you do, they and you will be much better off for it.

If this is a topic that interests you then you may also find **these notes** from Australia's first Employee Experience conference, hosted by PwC, very useful.

### **WANT MORE?**

If you'd like help with building the skills and smarts of your team email **[Sue-Ella](#)** or **[get in touch](#)**.



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