



DON'T SACK YOUR SENIOR PROFESSIONALS JUST YET...

BY SUE-ELLA PRODONOVICH

Traditionally, professional services firm partnerships have been built around the 'up or out' model. This means when a partner reaches a certain age (usually associated with becoming too sensible to flog themselves into the ground to keep hitting crazy billing targets), they're encouraged - sometimes forcibly - to step aside.

I think law firms and accounting firms are missing a real trick here. By pushing out senior staff at 55 or 60, they're usually not doing anything to drive more business or improve the quality of their service.

Oftentimes, I think their action means they're simply giving the junior partners a bigger cut of the same pie.

After all, senior professionals often bring with them the most knowledge, widest range of experience, best contacts and most balanced view of work and the world. When you ask them to step down just because you think they're past it you're also giving up all of this.

A BETTER APPROACH

I think rather than showing their senior partners the exit, firms should be looking to work out how they can use their accumulated skill, knowledge and contacts to their advantage. And, for me, that's not always simply to stick them on the luncheon circuit, schmoozing their clients so that they keep the work flowing in for others to do.

In many instances, there's a case for keeping senior team members in the engine room itself, performing and overseeing the work so that it continues to be done to the highest standard. As I've already argued, the rainmaker as we know it is dead. Competence is what counts most and many senior practitioners have competence in spades. How else did they make it this far?

That said, I don't think you can be too prescriptive about how to best employ your more seasoned troops. Every person has different strengths and can bring their own value to your firm.

That means there may be a role for your senior professionals in more client-facing activity. They often have huge networks that won't be tuning into your twitter feeds or podcasts. By freeing up their time to be ambassadors outside the firm, you can keep relationships going and have them introduce others into the networks they've spent a career building.

But, really, there are so many other ways you can use your senior professionals' strengths instead of pushing them out.

The key here is to think about this as career development, not performance management, no matter how long someone has been practising.

IDEAS FOR USING THE TALENTS OF YOUR SENIOR PROFESSIONALS

Here's three things to get the best out of your firm's approach with its most senior professionals

1. Stop giving them a budget they can't jump over
2. Provide them with career pathways on an opt-in basis
3. Check that your learning and development (L&D) programs includes new skills plus on-going support for the senior pros.

From then on, you can be creative. For instance, you could use your most experienced professionals to:

1. **Conduct [client feedback interviews](#).** If you ever want to show a client you're taking them seriously, send in a senior partner. Besides, in my experience they're often more tactful and less sensitive than up-and-comers - both great traits for this kind of work.
2. **Support less experienced professionals.** Your senior partners are a wealth of knowledge. Let them share their technical advice with others in your firm and lean on them for guidance on tricky situations and client relationships. They've probably seen it all before.
3. **Mentor your rising stars.** Have them take the next generation of firm leaders under their wings and let them know both how they did it and what's expected of a partner in your firm. Your senior professionals often make the best sounding boards or mentors for junior partners or those on the pathway to promotion.
4. **Scan the horizon.** Use your senior people as the firm's value-add 'scouts' who keep an eye out for new business opportunities and make sure internal referrals run smoothly for everyone.
5. **Lead the pitch.** Including the grown-ups earns the respect of clients, demonstrates succession of knowledge workers, and shows you're taking things seriously.
6. **Write and present.** Keep asking your senior professionals to present on and write about their areas of expertise. Also ask them to attend other's talks and seminars too. Most professionals want to keep their skills and knowledge razor sharp.
7. **Act as client.** Let them '[sit in the red chair](#)' and play the role of a client when reviewing pitches and presentations. They can also be the ones who test pricing scenarios and conduct your due diligence on any acquisitions.
8. **On-board lateral hires.** I've been in situations where the junior HR/receptionist has taken a lateral hire around the firm and introduced them to people then made sure they're settling in. Between you and me, that's a bit humiliating. What better way to show a new gun recruit they matter than having a senior member of your team take the responsibility for on-boarding them and looking after their welfare in the early days?
9. **Overseeing your alumni networks.** Given all their experience and contact, what could be better than taking your alumni networks off the hands of the HR team and giving them to the established members of your firm. After all, these are the people your alumni know and respect. Better still, why not even develop a 'club' of senior professionals?

LET YOUR CLIENTS KNOW

These approaches are not simply for the feel-good factor. To create real competitive advantage you should also let your clients know the variety of ways you engage your talent.

After all, clients want (and need) to know about plans for succession and how their relationship is being managed in the long term. And your firm will have concrete evidence of its diversity.

THE RETIREMENT AGE IS RUBBISH...

“We used to see that on the Friday you were a high-powered leader, and on Monday you weren’t. You could be losing huge value for no particularly useful end.” Christina Blacklaw, President of the Law Society of England and Wales (2019 Spencer & Newton report)

Another thing we should get out of our heads is that retirement happens around 65. We’re living and staying healthy so much longer than even 30 or 40 years ago that there’s usually no medical or health-related reason whatsoever to stop working in our mid-sixties. Architects are often in their prime after 65, so too are barristers.

In fact, what I find particularly intriguing is that law firms will often happily brief a barrister who’s over 60 or even 70 and at the same time they’re moving on their own partners at a much younger age.

It just doesn’t make sense.

In my view, it’s not the senior professionals who are stuck in the past, more than often it’s the firms and their career structures. By harnessing the talents of experienced partners, you give your firm the potential to provide a better service and build its long-term profitability.

Who knows you might even find your [next Superstar is your oldest pro!](#)

If you’d like to know more about how to keep using the skills of senior professionals in your practice, [get in touch](#).

FURTHER READING

Judgment in a recent case on responsibilities expected of more experienced legal professionals [Re Albert \(a barrister\) and McLean \(a solicitor\) \[2021\] VSC 297 \(26 May 2021\)](#)

Malhotra, N., Smets, M. & Morris, T. (2016) [Career Pathing and Innovation in Professionals Service Firms](#) Academy of Management Perspectives, Vol 30, No 4, 369-383

Spencer, N, & Newton, S (2019) [Creating Competitive Advantage: Career Pathways For Senior Leaders](#). Paper 4 of report by the University of Oxford Said Business School and Meridian West.

Hannah Wootton, Australian Financial Review (29 April 2021) [“Deloitte Loses Battle To Keep Partner Retirement Details Secret”](#)

Edmund Tadros, Australian Financial Review (6 April 2021) [“Terminated: KPMG Belatedly Dumps Early Retirement Rule”](#)

Edmund Tadros, Australian Financial Review (29 Aug 2020) [“The Times Have Overtaken ‘Archaic’ Retirement Rules.”](#)

Edmund Tadros & Hannah Wootton, Australian Financial Review, (21 April 2020) [“Liberal and Labour Politicians Slam KPMG Retirement Clause”](#)

Roll On Friday, Sept 2010 [Freehills Launches ‘Crazy’ empty chair initiative](#)

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