

Internal Communications for Law Firms

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Executive summary

This research was conducted in response to the significant changes proposed in the Legal Services Bill 2006/07 which will open up the legal services market to corporate investment. Alternative business structures will enable UK law firms to incorporate and raise money. Therefore, the more successful firms will benefit from an influx of funds, enabling them to buy the best talent and fund takeover bids for their competitors. Consequently, the legal services marketplace, which is already highly competitive, is likely to consolidate even further, leaving behind those unable to adapt.

More than ever, effective internal communication has become a critical success factor. Firms increasingly recognise the importance to their survival and success of minimising uncertainty and retaining the confidence and commitment of their clients and valuable fee-earning professionals. Firms need to ensure that their internal brand reflects the external brand that attracts and retains their clients. Forward-thinking firms have already established a more open corporate culture aimed at engaging and retaining the best people and becoming 'a great place to work'. This translates into client satisfaction and increased business.

This report aims to provide managers and practitioners with internal communication responsibilities with information and guidance on developing a strategy to succeed. It examines a selection of the key communication challenges and explores some of the latest thinking on adapting best practice from the corporate world to the rapidly changing legal and professional services market.

Chapter 1 looks at the new external and the existing internal challenges. The opening up of legal services presents both threats and opportunities. As top consultant

Alan Hodgart observes, even firms that do nothing will find their position altered by shifts in the business environment in which they operate. It's absolutely crucial to give partners and fee-earners clear communication on the firm's strategic direction. Operating in a climate of uncertainty risks losing high performers and their clients, so internal communication has become a matter of survival.

Structure and ownership present further internal communication challenges. Because of the expert services they provide, professional services firms tend to form a matrix structure divided by line of business. There is also the historic divide between fee-earners and management support functions. As a result, many partnerships lack the necessary communication infrastructure to put key messages across to all stakeholders and to receive their input, buy-in and feedback. But where is the best place to start? Chapter 2 outlines the key elements underpinning a workable internal communication strategy.

As the partnership is required to vote on strategic decisions and elect the senior leadership team, partnership communication is naturally a high priority. However, commonly there is a significant communication gap between practice group leaders and their teams. Chapter 3 examines the critical role of line-manager communication and suggests some solutions aimed at giving everyone in the firm a clear line of sight to its overall strategic direction. People need to understand their part in the big picture.

A key challenge is turning top fee-earners into good communicators, given that the traits and training that make a good lawyer sit uncomfortably with an open and

collaborative corporate culture. Examples from law firms and other sectors around the world show how giving practice group leaders training in people skills, as well as communication materials and support, can transform line-manager communication. As well as ensuring that key messages reach their intended audiences, this helps knowledge and information to pervade the matrix structure and keep people involved in what is going on in the business.

Chapter 4 explores leadership – key to the success of any partnership. We focus on law firm leaders, whose role is shifting and expanding in response to consolidation and competition in the legal services marketplace. What makes a good law firm leader? Should law firms appoint their best fee earner as leader, given that leadership has become a full-time job? The new generation of law firm leaders is overturning the traditional hierarchical structure and taking a more business-like approach. We profile two visionary leaders who acknowledge that effective internal communication is a critical success factor: their styles are very different, but they both achieve exceptional results within this changing environment through a consultative and facilitative approach.

Chapter 5 presents the clear business case for effective internal communication, emphasising the importance of continual measurement and evaluation, demonstrating how to maximise the return on investment (ROI) on internal communication resources. Good end-to-end internal communication contributes significantly to a firm's ability to retain its high performers, provide better client service and increase its growth and profitability.

Chapter 6 outlines some of the best practices recommended by top consultants and adopted by forward-thinking firms.

Find out how leading professional services organisations and law firms have developed internal communication programmes which underpin their position as industry leaders and great places to work.

Part 2 comprises best-practice examples of internal communication in action with practical, up-to-date case studies from leading firms that have successfully developed comprehensive programmes which demonstrate the outstanding benefits that they have derived from investing in firm-wide and local communication initiatives and activities. Participating organisations include Berwin Leighton Paisner, BDO Stoy Hayward, Clarke Willmott, Eversheds, Harbottle & Lewis, Robert Muckle, and Shearman & Sterling. This is combined with expert guidance from internationally recognised consultants, including Paul Gilbert, James Harkness, Julie Harrison, Alan Hodgart, Nick Jarrett-Kerr, global communication consultant Paul Sanchez and communication measurement specialist Angela Sinickas.