

Part 1

Leading Lawyers Share Secrets to Business Development for Women

These tried-and-true approaches can help women and their law firms overcome business development challenges.

By Sarah Martin and Ali Levin

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Editor's note: This is the first in a two-part series.

"It is no longer enough just to be an excellent lawyer to succeed in a law firm. You have to add value to a firm's practice to be able to rise through the ranks. We need to empower young women to make business development a priority." This call to action from Sharon Lewis, global head of financial institutions at Hogan Lovells, is one we hear over and over.

That is why our law firm clients regularly ask us, "How can we support the women in our firms to develop new business and client relationships so that more women rise to partnership and leadership?" As one client puzzled, "We've hired the best business development specialists to work with our talented young women. Why isn't it helping?" When we ask those specialists how they see things, they say, "The funny thing is that business development is no different for women than men."

We set out to find out what is actually going on, to discover what works well for successful women lawyers. In the spirit of helping the next generations of women lawyers, over 20 women partners—in different jurisdictions, representing different practice groups, and from top global law firms—generously shared some of their wisdom about what works in practice. We have also drawn on our combined decades of one-to-one coaching and leadership work with over 100 female lawyers across the globe.

The marketing experts are right: The mindset of all successful lawyers with good client relationship skills, regardless of gender, is not very different. It's a relationship business, and we heard that repeatedly. As Sarah Jones, a partner at Clifford Chance said, "People think the mecca is the new client. It's not the new client. It's the client you already have. The client you have loved so much they don't want to use anyone else." Eliza McDougall, the executive partner for the New York office of White & Case, added, "Keep in touch with your network. Cultivate your relationships to make sure you keep them."

However, because of systemic and behavioral challenges that women face, there are steps that law firms, more experienced partners and individual women all must take to help women adopt a business development mindset earlier, to see it as a priority and to integrate it more fully, enjoyably and confidently into their lives.



In our framework, we identified five successful approaches to business development, named the structures and behaviors that may make the approach more challenging for women, and outlined how firms and individuals can take positive action. We'll discuss the first two approaches in this piece, and three more in Part II.

Do It Early

Building and maintaining client relationships is critical to a thriving legal practice and successful lawyers do this early and often. Lewis doesn't mince words: "You need to make business development a priority if you want a career as a partner in this firm or any firm." Successful lawyers, like Nicola Rabson, global head of employment and incentives at Linklaters, said, "I don't think of it as business development. It's part of my role and integrated into what I do."

Challenges for Women: Some women hold a limiting belief that as a young associate all emphasis should be placed on chargeable hours. Tracey Renshaw, a corporate partner at DLA Piper, said, "Junior female lawyers tend to focus less on business development than males—to their detriment. It comes back to women wanting people to think well of them, to put their heads down, do a good job as a lawyer and the rest will follow."

The academic research supports that this is a widely held belief by women. Some told us networking was actively discouraged when they were young lawyers. Nearly all with whom we spoke said they lacked senior female role models early in their careers, a clear disadvantage to client development skills in what is still largely an apprenticeship-based model.

Firm Solutions: Support women by budgeting for and sponsoring networking events at the earliest stages of lawyers' careers. Katja Butler, a corporate partner at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, told us, "Each year we encourage our junior women attorneys to organize their own event where they personally invite clients. By running events without partners present, they can have their own space and they love it." These firm-sponsored events create dedicated spaces for young lawyers to invite their contacts and develop their relationships, even before acquiring significant legal experience. Jessica Adam, a corporate partner at Macfarlanes, said, "Find someone at your level and try to make a good connection with them. You're in it for the long term."

If the rules are you have to bill a certain number of hours, and women play by the rules, then you have to change the rules. "There is something wrong with the system," Lewis said. "Our work is not just about the chargeable hour. For women who have a strong desire to do well, they look at a system that keeps asking, Are you above or below 100% utilization? That system also needs to give more value to what is done by way of business development."

Women must mentor and show juniors that business development is as much a part of the job as billing hours, and the system must define and reward business development as a meaningful contribution.

Individual Solutions: Find mentors and role models to start business development now. Good mentoring and coaching on how to build and tend to relationships early in your career helps far more than traditional marketing training. Mentors can help cultivate a mindset that building and deepening client relationships is a priority and an integral part of every lawyer's day job. As Marie-Aimee de Dampierre, head of EMEA and an intellectual property, media and technology partner at Hogan Lovells, stated, "Women need to understand the power of the network as soon as they are out of school."

Do It Your Way

The legal profession is, at its heart, a human profession, and successful lawyers know that personal connections with clients are made in ways that are genuine and long-term. As many women told us, the closer you can be to your true self, the better when building relationships.

Challenges for Women: Until recently, personal connections have been made almost exclusively in traditional male activities. We heard endless stories about golf, football, shooting and drinking events. Rabson told us, "How women perceive

firm-sponsored business development activities doesn't resonate with them, so they don't explore it. A lot of women look at role models and think they have to mirror that: sporting events, golf days, Claridge's dinners and late nights. That just seems such a long way from their experience." It is critical to find an authentic way to develop relationships that is not dictated by past practices, and to draw on emotional intelligence skills like listening, curiosity, empathy and collaboration. Phoebe Wilkinson, a disputes partner at Hogan Lovells, explained, "People often feel that women are better listeners and better at reading the room and a good business development person has to be able to do both. You need to listen, and listen carefully."

Firm Solutions: Support and showcase successful, diverse ways to develop business, debunking the myth that networking events will necessarily be uncomfortable and uninteresting. Senior women told us of creative events, sometimes including families of clients and lawyers, that have created and embedded relationships: flower shows, pop-up fashion shops, tennis tournaments, musicals with children, and discussions about Chinese history and politics. Lewis said, "Work is a huge part of your life. People, including clients, are a huge part of your life. It is not all about scratching at your desk or computer. Think about what enhances your life. Singing in a choir, rock climbing, finding things you can do with others that enhance your life, then business development is less of an ask."

Firms must provide budgets to support these new initiatives so that it doesn't feel like "asking parents for pocket money," which is what one junior partner told us. Instead, firms can support lawyers like Bryony Widdup, a partner at DLA Piper, who successfully co-hosted, with a female client, a marine conservation event. Nicola Ichnatowicz, an employment partner at Trowers & Hamblins in the UK, explained, "It comes down to bureaucracy and budget. Decisions are made by committees about where to put the budget and so you always have to make the most of the finite resources available."

Individual Solutions: Connect with what or who interests you and include it in your business development initiatives. In our coaching work with women lawyers, we help them connect with who they are, what drives them and what contribution they want to make. We take that a step further by asking how to bring those conversations to their client relationships to deepen those connections. Just before the pandemic we invited a panel of highly successful female general counsel to our program to share their wisdom with young women about how to connect with clients. One summed it up, "We're just like you! We have families, kids, dogs, households and it's OK to talk about it." There was a collective sigh of relief, knowing that you can be yourself and that can be the foundation upon which to build strong and authentic relationships with clients.

Leading Lawyers Share Secrets to Business Development for Women

Women open up about the approaches that have helped put them on the path to business development success.

December 21, 2020

Editor's note: This is the second part in a series on strategic approaches women and their firms can bring to business development.

We identified five successful approaches to business development, named the structures and behaviors that may make the approach more challenging for women, and outlined how firms and individuals can take positive action. In the first part of this series, we detailed the first two approaches, and in this part we cover the final three.

Be Visible

As Constanze Bandilla-Dany, a litigation partner at Norton Rose Fulbright, explained, "Get visible, get out of your comfort zone, and connect with people." Torrey McClary, a health care partner at King & Spalding, added, "I work on being fully present when I attend events in person. At conferences, I often observe others running back to their hotel rooms or offices to work or decompress during breaks, but I stay engaged and focus on connecting with friends, peers and contacts and meeting new people."

Challenges for Women: Relationships are neither built nor maintained behind a desk, and women get stuck there. The unconscious affinity bias of older men toward younger men has two impacts. First, men are often brought to meetings, whereas women are asked to do the research or submit their bios in pitches for clients they never meet. One young partner told us that even when she was invited to meetings, she was "getting put next to a secretary or a very junior woman just because we were the only women there. All of the senior people were men, and they were having a very different conversation." Second, we heard that women are often allocated more nonbillable work that does not lead to business.

Firm Solutions: All lawyers must be consciously asking themselves, Are our women visible? Firms need structures that ensure there is a fair allocation of opportunities, including chargeable work, business development and administrative work. In meetings with clients, ensure women are seated by important clients and given the same opportunities to connect with relevant people as the men. Mentors like Mahvesh Qureshi, a member of the Hogan Lovells global board and



a corporate M&A partner, suggest young lawyers pay close attention to the choices that others make. "Look around and see what your male colleagues are doing. If they are doing client-facing or potential client-facing work and you are spending your time on the equivalent of housework in your organization, don't be surprised when you fall behind on business development."

Individual Solutions: Women must understand the financial implications of the choices they make and be proactive in seeking visibility opportunities. In doing less of what has been dubbed "office housework," which women either volunteer for or are given more often than men, Melinda Upton, an intellectual property and technology partner at DLA Piper, advises women to understand the financial implications of the nonbillable work they agree to do. "Try to avoid being boxed into the operational side or confirming the automatic bias for women taking the softer stuff. The best leaders are across both people issues and financials."

And if you are uncomfortable in being assertive, Clare Maurice, senior partner of Maurice, Turnor Gardner, suggested, "Team up and get out there. Be energetic. People like to see someone different. It is an advantage for women." Susheela Rivers, the office managing partner of DLA Piper's Hong Kong office told us, "Find your voice and use it. It's your biggest tool. Even when you are uncomfortable to do so, when

the music plays get up and dance. The experience is transformed when you are part of it.”

Believe In Yourself

Successful relationship builders believe strongly in their own well-deserved value and have confidence in their contribution.

Challenges for Women: Men are assumed to have more credibility than women. “Even less experienced men can appear to have innate confidence and immediate credibility,” McClary said. “Women are often much more senior before they feel that way.”

Junior partners echo this. “If a man talks, everyone listens, it’s like he is holding court. For women it’s more difficult to have a loud voice without people thinking it’s aggressive rather than assertive.”

Research confirms that women struggle to talk about what they’ve done well and to own their achievements. Sarah Jones, a partner at Clifford Chance, sees “lots of situations, from performance reviews to the partnership process, where women have plenty of opportunities to say how fantastic they are. But it’s almost like they can’t form the words.” With so few senior women, this problem of perception and self-perception is compounded by male affinity biases subconsciously at play.

Firm Solutions: Help women associates find active champions, role models and sponsors. Tracey Renshaw, a corporate partner at DLA Piper, tells younger women, “Develop your brand. Don’t just rely on your expertise. I’m a strong believer in supporting women and for that you have to speak out. Things don’t just happen. You need to stand for something.” As numbers of senior women increase, so too will the number of champions. Fiona Poole, a private wealth partner at Maurice Turnor Gardner, considered this in choosing to work at her firm. “There are lots of women leaders at our firm. I was attracted to the firm because it had very outspoken female role models.”

Having female clients can also help, as Qureshi explains: “I went from having all male clients to a majority of female clients. The biggest difference I’ve seen is the threshold presumption of expertise when I’m dealing with a female GC. She assumes and takes at face value that I have expertise and credibility. With several male client relationships, I have had to prove and reprove myself because there wasn’t such a presumption. It’s exhausting and discouraging to constantly reprove your credentials and expertise.”

Individual Solutions: Build your brand, recognize your strengths, and celebrate achievements. Our coaching focuses on confidence, connecting with a sense of purpose and personal brand building. Katja Butler, a corporate partner at



Five successful approaches to business development.

Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, told us it’s important “to be authentic, and that requires a lot of thinking about who you are and how you want to work with clients.” Elaina Bailes, a litigation partner at Stewarts, enjoys building her brand through the press. “I got proactive about the mainstream press,” she said. “I asked our PR agency and marketing team and they helped connect me with the Times. If you don’t ask, you don’t get.”

Be Brave and Resilient

Business development is a long game. Even when pitches are unsuccessful, lawyers must understand and believe that clients actually want them to keep building their relationships. Jones advises younger lawyers not to dwell on a rejection: “Not everything is going to come off. It’s not a personal thing. Be brave and get on with it.”

Challenges for Women: Women tend to bear the brunt of rejection harder than men. Upton talks candidly about being comfortable with failure. “In my experience, female professionals must avoid the trap of thinking ‘I’m not good enough.’ Failure is essential for success but men have an easier time putting a positive spin on it.” Eliza McDougall, the executive partner for the New York office of White & Case, agreed: “We are our own worst enemies as women. Feeling inadequate and like we can’t do it is what holds us back. And there is no reason why women in this day and age can’t be incredibly successful. Know we are talented and capable, provide good service and build relationships early.”

Firm Solutions: Proactively respond to the client demand for more diverse representation. Some we interviewed shared stories where teams of all male lawyers showed up to pitches

and were escorted to the door. “Why would you come without any women?” a senior female general counsel asked. Qureshi added, “Our clients are developing and promoting females in their organizations at a faster rate than we are. As women are being cherry-picked out of law firms and accepting senior GC roles, they want their legal teams to match their organization’s makeup. That creates an opportunity that wasn’t there before for female lawyers in law firms looking to expand their business relationships.”

In our programs, junior women are asked to discuss their business development successes, regardless of size. The opportunity to have even small successes recognized builds their confidence and brand and encourages them to keep going. Nicola Rabson, global head of employment and incentives at Linklaters, explained, “When I was young, I was very naïve, I never thought that because I was a woman, I couldn’t do it. I once just called a COO in Boston of a major private equity house where my son’s friend’s father had worked. I asked him for the name of the guy in charge, phoned him, went to Boston and they’ve been a client of the firm since.”

Individual Solutions: Adopt a growth mindset, take small steps, and try coaching for resilience. Rabson tells the women around her, “You don’t have to get a huge instruction.” Small steps are a big start to finding your own voice. Bryony Widup, a partner at DLA Piper, believes that setbacks are the biggest opportunity for learning. She explained, “BD is the most enjoyable part of the job. It’s sociable, challenging and when it goes well, it’s delightful. There’s also lots of positivity about failing and learning from failing. A real exception to the mindset applied to legal work in law firms where we can’t make a mistake when we give client advice.” Nicola Ihnatowicz, an employment partner at Trowers & Hamlin in the UK, echoes this sentiment. She said, “The way to be successful at business development is to get out of your own way. It’s not about you. You might be nervous or feeling the pressure, but you just have to get over that; make it about the client and not about you. Practice and experience obviously help.”

Conclusion

The women with whom we spoke see business development as a gateway to the leadership table. Lucy Ward, a litigation partner at Stewarts, puts it succinctly: “You don’t get made up to equity partner unless you’re responsible for bringing in a certain chunk of business.” McClary added, “If women are to achieve the independence, autonomy and respect they deserve, they need to become indispensable to key institutional client relationships or cultivate and build their own relationships.”

Research by McKinsey makes clear that the business case for diversity is stronger than ever in the COVID-19 world. More diverse businesses are more profitable and better positioned to be more resilient, adaptive and innovative to meet the new challenges we are all facing. Women’s attrition in law is also well documented, with McKinsey research in 2017 showing junior associate representation as 48% but shrinking to 19% at equity partner level. Law firms have been struggling with how to create more sustainable cultures to enable all their lawyers to thrive in their working lives. Research supports that women have an important contribution to leadership and to developing those sustainable cultures. Qureshi added, when the client relationships are hers, she is “able to lead the team in a way that is good for the firm, focusing on collaboration, generosity, and creating opportunities for younger female associates sooner.”

Clients too are demanding more diverse representation on panels, and as one partner told us, “I hate to say it, but it couldn’t be a better time if you are a woman wanting to do business development. Everyone wants to deal with women, and even if they don’t, they know they should.”

Acting now to help young women hone their business development skills is a strategic imperative if we want more of them to become successful lawyers and move into leadership positions.

Sarah Martin and Ali Levin are leadership development experts and co-founders of Martin & Levin.