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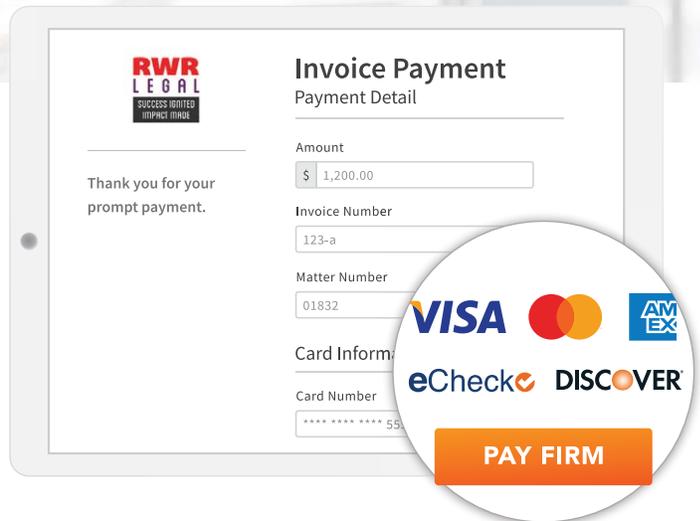
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# What New Hires May Lack — and How to Fix It

These in-demand skills may not be inherent; however, lawyers and support staff can learn them.



**ERIN BRERETON**  
Owner, Chicago Journalist Media

**This month, a new crop of third-year students will begin graduating from law schools across the United States — but some may not feel at all ready to start working in a law firm or department.**

A Gallup-Purdue Index study published last year found only 20 percent of law school graduates who received a degree between 2010 and 2015 think their educational experience prepared them well enough to enter the legal field.

A separate survey suggests other industry members agree: 95 percent of hiring partners and senior associates told LexisNexis they believe recent law school grads don't possess key practical skills when they're hired.

## **PIECING TOGETHER KEY PROFICIENCIES**

The issue may stem, at least in part, from the fact that law schools tend to focus on technical skills. However, attorneys who participated in an Institute for Advancement of the American Legal

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System study identified professional competencies — such as listening attentively and responding promptly to requests — as far more important than being able to draft briefs or prepare a case for trial.

With technology changing the legal secretary role’s definition in the past 15 years, and Robert Half Legal research reporting blended/hybrid paralegal and legal secretary positions have become more prevalent in the last two, legal support staff members may also be finding expectations for their role have changed.

Luckily, employers are stepping up to provide additional hard- and soft-skill instruction that can help position new hires to succeed, according to Valerie Fontaine, a Partner with legal search firm Seltzer Fontaine Beckwith.

“If associates have a particular issue in an area, they may bring in outside coaches and consultants and have [a] special class on a subject,” Fontaine says. “It’s one of the things candidates ask about. A firm that has excellent training and mentoring will be able to better attract and retain attorneys; it’s a competitive advantage.”

Some firms are incorporating specialized skills into the onboarding process — and beyond. Consider integrating these into your procedures.

### COMMUNICATION

“[Associates want] more soft-skills training and more networking training,” says Lauren Stone, Director of Lawyer Recruiting and Development at 200-plus attorney firm Morris, Manning & Martin LLP. “Especially in the past few years, that has come up.”

This spring, the firm plans to host a communications-centric training session for associates in their third year and above.

“We have someone coming in to talk about how to communicate with others and listen to connect,” Stone says. “Sometimes, with different communication styles, people don’t always get the right point across to others when they communicate.”

In today’s digital environment, communication skills are something to consider when hiring employees with significant experience — and ones who are newer to the workforce, according to Fennemore Craig, Chief Human Resources Officer Marlene Humbert.

The Mountain West law firm has tweaked some of its training, Humbert says, since starting to bring students from Arizona State University’s LSAT-oriented Critical Legal Preparation Program to do entry-level work about a year and a half ago.

“We get students who are very comfortable communicating via text or electronically, but we stress the importance of face-to-face time,” she says. “Part of the training we provide [involves saying], ‘if you’re going back and forth over email three to four times, you need to pick up the phone, because something is getting lost in transit.’”

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### CLIENT RELATIONS

Internal communication is, of course, just one aspect of legal work; firms may also offer instruction to help associates interact effectively with clients.

For instance, one of the training videos attorneys watch during their first week at Knobbe Martens covers delivering exceptional client service — including adhering to individual client preferences, such as sending all communication via letter, says Jonathan Bachand, a Partner at the Orange County, California-headquartered firm, which employs nearly 275 lawyers and scientists.

“We try to make sure associates understand it’s not a one-size-fits-all situation,” Bachand says. “A lot of soft-skills training is

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“Working efficiently and effectively is difficult for attorneys who are just starting out. You can be at the office from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., look at the clock at the end of the day and say, ‘I only billed four hours; that’s not up to my quota.’ You have to make sure they have the resources available to [manage their time].”

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about being engaged with your team; if attorneys have a question about how to respond to [a] client, talk about it to a partner first — the kind of skills that some would argue are common sense but someone practicing law for the first time might not understand.”

In the annual weeklong group orientation that all associates underwent in September, Knobbe Martens offered additional relations-related insight in a presentation featuring seven tips to keep clients and partners happy.

“The idea was when you start out as an associate, in many respects, your clients are the partners you work with,” Bachand says. “You aren’t bringing in your own clients right away; your job is to keep the partners happy so they’re giving you work. Explaining that — and setting out specific ways of being responsible and expectations — they can see, ultimately, keeping clients happy is the same thing as keeping partners happy.”

Because staff members may have contact at times with clients before an attorney does, the firm also offers hands-on training — which can include shadowing an assistant who’s been with the firm for years — when they start that’s intended to illustrate positive client interactions and underscore the importance of confidentiality.

“They sit together, so everything that comes through, they’re working on with somebody who knows exactly what to do,” Bachand says. “The overall takeaway is to make sure people understand clients are the most important thing to the firm. We want staff to understand to be ultra-polite to everybody that person calls on the phone; it might be our most important client.”

### LEGAL SPECIFICS

While much of the new hire instruction that’s offered skews toward soft skills, firms also sometimes educate attorneys about technical work.

Although new attorneys may have been exposed as summer associates to e-discovery, copyright work and

some of the transactional and litigation topics that Knobbe Martens covered during its September group training, the presentations, Bachand says, can serve as a refresher on how to perform specific tasks, such as claim drafting or assisting with legal research.

“Most people are doing patent prosecution. Some will be doing trademark prosecution, and some are going to focus on patent and trademark litigation,” he says. “Since Knobbe Martens focuses on intellectual property, it gives us an opportunity to preview a lot of different things they will be doing on a day-to-day basis. It just helps to provide that touchstone, where they can go back and look at the training materials.”

In the months following its annual group training, the firm also tends to plan follow-up lunches that cover specific additional topics — such as its international patent prosecution department’s role, the subject of one of its lunchtime training sessions last fall.

“That’s important to many clients seeking protection in foreign countries, and it is very nuanced, because each country has specific rules,” Bachand says. “In-house specialists help with a lot of that and coordinate filings with foreign counsels.”

### TIME MANAGEMENT

Operating within a billable hours’ system can be a new experience for young associates.

“Working efficiently and effectively is difficult for attorneys who are just starting out,” Bachand says. “You can be at the office from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., look at the clock at the end of the day and say, ‘I only billed four hours; that’s not up to my quota.’ You have to make sure they have the resources available to [manage their time].”

To help associates maximize productivity, Bachand’s firm provides training to help them learn how to best work with staff and other attorneys — including determining what items they can hand off, and which they should hold on to.

“As they get more senior roles, often, delegating work becomes more important,” Bachand says. “They’re faced with the dilemma of, ‘Do I do this? I know I’ll be able to do it right the first time.’ But you have to train for the future, too. Yes, you can do it; that doesn’t mean you don’t need to explain it to a more junior attorney who could work with you on this and is striving to learn more things.”

### COLLABORATION

In addition to presentation-based learning, a number of firms offer mentoring programs. According to Fontaine, these programs can provide useful information about firm practices, as well as insight into how to succeed within a firm member’s work environment.

“They teach new attorneys, whether they’re laterals or newbies, the unwritten rules,” she says. “Every firm has its own style — certain ways to communicate, hidden power structures; that’s something every new attorney needs [to know].”

Stone’s firm has found its 3 year-old mentoring program has helped integrate both lateral associates, who meet with a mentor on a monthly basis for their first year at the firm, and entry-level associates, who are paired with a mentor for their first two years.

The firm tries to match mentees with someone within their larger practice group that the mentee won’t be working with on a daily basis — for example, matching an associate who does merger and acquisitions work in the corporate group with a technology attorney from that group.

Participants get to know each other during periodic social events the firm plans during the year.

“The value in associates having a mentor outside of who they’re working with all the time is it gives them an opportunity to get to know someone else at the firm, so they don’t feel isolated in their own group,” Stone says. “We’ve found the more relationships they have with people, the more likely they are to stay. Our retention rate has improved — about 20 percent less associates leave. It’s also hopefully opening up potential cross-selling opportunities.”

### BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

With 82 percent of managing partners and chairs singling weak business development skills out as the top reason for

their firm’s chronic underperformance, according to Altman Weil’s 2017 Law Firms in Transition Survey, development efforts are clearly an area firms and attorneys are — or at least should be — focusing on.

Older, experienced attorneys aren’t the only ones being asked to contribute to business growth. Some of the small-to midsize firms Seltzer Fontaine Beckwith recruits for offer business development training programs geared toward junior associates, as well as higher levels, according to Fontaine.

“Business development has become an essential skill,” she says. “A lot of things go into being able to do it — leadership, public speaking. Some people are just natural-born marketers and have connections. But they need to start thinking that way if they’re not.”

In addition to the business development presentation Knobbe Martens included in the weeklong training it offered new associates, the firm also sponsored a business development-based lunch last fall with the partner who’s in charge of the effort internally.

The lunchtime session, according to Bachand, helped give its new hires an overview of what the firm considers to be business development best practices — which can be an unfamiliar, yet crucial, concept.

“Law school doesn’t prepare you to be a salesperson, and when you’re an attorney at a law firm, part of your role is you’re selling yourself and the firm’s capabilities,” he says. “When it gets down to it, there are a lot of highly skilled lawyers that clients can choose from — it does take a special skill to be able to convince people you are the person they should be spending their time and money on.” ■

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Erin Brereton** is a freelance writer, editor and content strategist who has written about the legal industry, business, technology and other topics for 20 years.



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