

A Long-Term Approach to Associate Development

Studying a firm's approach to associate development provides a more concrete approach to firm selection, according to Knobbe Martens' Irfan Lateef and Ben Shiroma.

By Irfan Lateef and Ben Shiroma

As a law student, choosing a firm is a consequential decision. Most firms tout collegiality and professionalism. Some tout a work-hard, play-hard culture. Others mention lifestyle and work-life balance. According to these sources, the legal practice is always a friendly and rewarding dream job. But what does this mean for a new associate? Can professionally curated websites and a few interviews truly tell the whole story? Consider focusing on a firm's approach to associate development for a more meaningful criterion.

An Associate's Point of View

By keeping you busy, is your firm helping you grow your skill-set or just growing its bottom line? Do your career goals align with your firm's plans for you as an attorney?

An associate might ask a mentor when they will get "real work" because work like document or contract review and legal research can feel tedious. But such projects can showcase talents and work ethic. Embracing and communicating results

from document review and legal research can reveal your readiness for a deeper role. At some firms, such tasks are stepping stones: drafting a research memorandum can lead to drafting a brief section, an entire brief, and maybe even an argument in court or more. Partners at firms that adopt this approach want to help associates start working on "real work" as quickly as possible. When training promises are fulfilled, you will benefit at the same time as the firm that filled them.

A firm invests in associates through feedback and mentorship. Attorneys reflexively track time, which correlates closely to money. Thus, when a partner spends time providing feedback, they are investing in your skills and development as an associate. This process opens doors for you: Your next brief will be better than the last. After seconding a deposition or observing an argument, you will later take depositions or make arguments of your own. After mastering the facts, you may be included in a client meeting on strategy options.



Courtesy photos

Irfan Lateef, left, and Ben K. Shiroma, right, of Knobbe Martens.

Some firms consciously structure their incentives to encourage working hard, while maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Quality of work can suffer after the umpteenth hour, and eventually, burnout sets in, and excitement wanes. Your desired career trajectory should align with a realistic evaluation of becoming—and staying—an attorney in your chosen specialty at your firm.

A Firm's Point of View

Law firm partners are just as busy as hard-working associates. Partners own the business, serving as managers, workers, and customer service representatives. At some firms, partners want to train associates to shoulder some of their substantive load. They want associates to manage

day-to-day matter activities, participate in client meetings, take depositions, and argue motions. For this arrangement to succeed, associates should demonstrate the traits needed for such advancement. Knowing the relevant facts, documents, and law is a start. Associates should also engage in group discussions, suggest strategy options, and demonstrate enthusiasm. This approach will free up partners to strategize, direct, and evaluate.

Promoting associates from within pays long-term dividends to the firm by sharing the benefits and responsibilities of partnership, and conveying the firm's development philosophy to the next generation of partners.

Things To Look For

A firm's approach to associate development is a holistic matter that resists pithy labels. Look for qualitative and quantitative indicators of how a firm treats you.

The types of work shared by the team can be very revealing. Document analysis and legal research are great for building fundamental skills. It is healthy when even senior associates and partners assist with and closely supervise these tasks. The type of feedback you receive or seek, especially informally, is also telling. If partners do not help

improve associates' skills or show interest in development, the firm may not value associate progress.

The likelihood of quickly becoming a partner is another key, but nuanced, indicator for associate development. A short partnership track may be illusory if attrition is high. Likewise, low attrition may be empty if new partners are not considered in a reasonable time. This indicator is most relevant for firms with short partnership tracks and low attrition rates. Firms with shorter partnership tracks have an incentive to quickly develop associates into contributing partners. By considering you early for partnership, a firm demonstrates its faith in your career.

How To Learn About Firms' Approaches

Digging into associate development philosophy may be hard work, but the extra effort will pay dividends. In-person witness testimony often reveals the truth in court. Likewise, speaking with attorneys at a firm, preferably informally, will likely bear fruit. Professional and bar organizations and networking opportunities are perfect for this informal dialogue.

Ask about the types of work attorneys do and how they interact with partners, teams, and cli-

ents. Inquire about the partner feedback they receive. Ask where they see themselves two or three years down the road. Find out how many associates are in their second, third, fourth year, and so on. Ask about how many equity partners were associates at the firm.

Clicking past a firm's sleek homepage can also be revealing. Associates' bios may reveal the types of work they do, the opportunities they receive, their progress, and their team roles. Partnership headcount and comparisons between entering class and new partner class press releases can also indicate long-term career viability.

Final Thoughts

Casual assertions about "culture" are ubiquitous in law firms and can mask the realities of a demanding profession. Studying a firm's approach to associate development provides a more concrete approach to firm selection. Try to find a firm that aligns with your professional goals. If you desire a long legal career, seek a firm that takes a similarly long view of your development.

Irfan Lateef is a partner in *Knobbe Martens' Orange County office*, and **Ben Shiroma** is an associate in the *firm's Los Angeles office*.