

## BACK TO (BUILDING) THE FUTURE

By Judith Finer Freedman

2009 was one of the most challenging years on record for the legal profession. According to *Law-Shucks*, a legal industry blog, major firms laid off 4,633 lawyers in 2009. More people were laid off than all the previous years combined. Legal practices from firms, public interest to government put in unprecedented cost containment measures.

Today, practices are waking up to the economic downturn realizing they have to go *back to (building) the future*. Part of those building basics is solidifying the connection to entering lawyers, the future of the legal profession. My consulting practice, The Balanced Worker Project™ has helped firms grasp the differences in how work gets done that the Millennials (born 1982-2002) bring to the workplace. Senior legal practitioners should understand that, generally speaking, Millennials were socialized at an early age and were trained to delve into new activities, with Mom and Dad signing them up for every lesson under the sun. As such, Millennials tend to exhibit strengths such as being entrepreneurial and highly technological, having the ability to multi-task particularly with their media, and possessing a pack mentality. Their world has always been filled with change and they have an innate quality to adapt quickly, which has served them well during challenging economic times.

Millennials' entry into the legal profession has been fraught with frustration on both sides. For seasoned attorneys, new associates make their work demands known long before their experience would warrant their right to do so. As a result, Millennials enter the practice with high expectations of how to be treated like no other generation before them. Their attitude, often described as *entitled*, has ruffled feathers.

As a result, early first impressions are often not positive and difficult to reverse. Millennials possess a less formal style that can create a negative bias over how their work will be ultimately evaluated by senior lawyers. On the flip side, new lawyers are struggling to acclimate to the pressures and deadlines their new role demands. Another blow to their adjustment is foregoing the usual time they spend with their virtual and personal networks.

Legal practices need to add another element to their training arsenal for new associates. Yes, it is important to offer workshops on such topics as how to document billable hours, explain law firm economics and the assignment process. However, it is equally important to add another essential component of professional development: *understanding workplace protocol*. The benefits of teaching new hires the cultural norms within your practice will drive appropriate behavior and build a solid career base for new recruits. The new book entitled, "*Cracking the Code: Unlocking the Potential of Future Leaders in the Legal Profession*" is filled with cost-effective and time-friendly initiatives any legal practice can undertake to build a stronger connection to incoming lawyers.

The following excerpt describes identifying and understanding workplace protocol:

There is a range of common situations that can become stumbling blocks in new lawyers' development as they begin

their careers. Some of these are: entitlement to broader assignments, prioritizing family/personal commitments, sensitivity to workplace etiquette, transitioning from academic world to working world (e.g. communication, attire, protocol) and knowing when and whom to ask for help.

Senior partners are frustrated with basic workplace protocol that they find is missing in today's new lawyers. Comments heard concerning work habits, range as follows: "I had an associate come into my office complaining that the work was too mundane;" "They expect instant gratification and praise;" and "They expect the firm to work around their time schedule when they have a commitment." By identifying workplace protocol, new lawyers learn the unwritten rules of a practice's culture and receive the message that senior practice leadership support their career development.

The procedure for identifying workplace protocol begins with a forum of practice leaders identifying behavioral norms that they are observing and those that are missing that are integral to running a successful law practice. These behaviors are often common sense for the Baby Boomer and Generation X professionals but not for the Millennials. For example, a seasoned lawyer would expect a new associate to avoid being on a BlackBerry during a meeting with senior lawyers. Yet, the Millennial lawyer may not see any respect barrier broken. The discussion in the forum guides the practice leaders to provide specific work examples with desired behaviors and anecdotal examples that new lawyers can relate to and learn from. For example, if a topic relating to "communication" has been raised, the facilitator probes deeper into sub-topics such as "virtual communication" such as email and text or "written communication" such as briefs and client communication.

Deborah Glatter, Director of Professional Development and Student Programs at Cassels Brock LLP, described the impact of the program as follows:

*Not only does each firm have its own culture, but also each practice group has its own idiosyncrasies. The partners take it as a given that these cultural differences and idiosyncrasies are universal and self-evident. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The associates need to be schooled in these matters in order to avoid missteps.*

All of the data provided by the senior practice leaders is shared in a seminar for new lawyers to learn the desired protocol and corresponding behaviors that fit into a practice's culture. New lawyers have a forum where they can ask questions without fear of career repercussions. The impact is a powerful retention tool that is cost-effective and builds retention in the early days of a career.

*Judith Finer Freedman is the Founder of The Balanced Worker Project™. She facilitates forums with practice leaders and new attorneys. For more information on her book, Cracking the Code: Unlocking the Potential for Future Leaders (West, 2010) go to [www.thebalancedworkerproject.com](http://www.thebalancedworkerproject.com) for a special promotional purchase offer. The book is also available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).*