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Route to the top

By **Jack Downton**

For many lawyers, reaching partnership signals the realisation of an ambition harboured since law school, if not even earlier. It cements years of hard work, underlines a dedication to the firm, and is a position held in high esteem, within not only the legal profession, but society at large.

Yet before opening the champagne, there is the small matter of the selection process to get through - one which many lawyers, despite their sharp technical skills, often fail to get right.

Sell, Sell, Sell!

The most important thing to bear in mind in the whole process is that you will need to sell yourself. Surprisingly, many lawyers find this difficult yet lawyers who fail to sell themselves run the risk of appearing disinterested and unconfident.

The partnership selection process requires lawyers not to communicate the extent of their legal knowledge, but to sell themselves as partner material. Lawyers often fail to fully understand that their partnership presentation is in fact their chance to pitch themselves to the selection committee as someone ready to take on the added responsibility that comes with the role. The best way to approach this is to think of your selection panel as a client – one to influence in a conversation-style that gets them on your side and establishes rapport.

What lawyers fail to understand is that the selection panel is not interested in finding ‘a good lawyer’ (there is no shortage of good lawyers), and so presenting yourself as such somewhat misses the point. The selection panel is in fact looking for partnership qualities and this is your opportunity to convey these attributes.

Not just another lawyer?

In order to impress, you will need to come across as more than just someone with impressive legal skills, and so in preparing for your interview, consider examples from your career thus far that differentiate you from your colleagues. Examples include technical ability above and beyond that of a ‘regular lawyer’: lawyers who can show examples of published work single themselves out as acknowledged authorities and sought-out experts. Showing that you constantly keep abreast of developments in the legal profession and that you have contributed or helped develop innovative services that your firm offers go a long way to highlight you as someone that is not just a great solicitor, but an innovative member of the team that strives to take the firm forward.

Information overload

In the interview process, you don't need to prove that you are a good lawyer or that you know a lot about the law. It is not the time to overload your panel with masses of academic, legal knowledge. This is a selection process, not your LLB exam paper on sources of constitutional and administrative law. Two or three examples, in each area of competency you focus on, are sufficient. One recently promoted lawyer told me: "I had to change my mindset. Instead of reeling off as much information as possible in the hope of impressing the selection panel with my legal skills, I had to refocus on the benefits I could offer the firm in my function as a partner".

Business Sense

In order to change a lawyer's mindset, what they have to remember is that despite all the legal, academic preparation that has got you this far in the firm, a law firm is primarily a business, not an academic institution, and lawyers must prove skills in business development if they are to be considered for partnership. They need to be able to show evidence of bringing business to the firm, and so lawyers that regularly network at corporate events, organise seminars, give speeches at lectures, and generally raise the profile of their firm to create business leads are able to demonstrate a deep understanding of the commercial side of a firm.

Leadership

Partners need to be good leaders, and so lawyers must also convey to the selection panel that they have leadership skills, and that the focus of their attention is not just on delivering quality service to their clients, but that they have a wider responsibility. A lawyer who is able to demonstrate team leading, for example, or mentoring younger lawyers has proven experience in leadership.

One example from the training I have given to lawyers is of a lawyer based in one of the European offices of a Magic Circle firm, whose colleagues often joked that she was so popular among her colleagues that you needed to take a ticket and wait your turn to see her, like at a supermarket delicatessen. She made time to sit with junior lawyers and invested time in others, so if, for example, she made important calls to clients, she allowed younger lawyers to listen in. Similarly, if she had important lunches to attend, then she often took a junior colleague along too for the experience. This is outside the scope of legal skills, but is of paramount importance in showing that you are the right sort of person to take on the role of partner. Good examples like this are very powerful and can also set up the question period nicely.

It is important to bear in mind that personal skills factor into judging eligibility for partnership. In preparing, consider how well known you are outside your department, how committed you are to the firm and how this manifests itself in your working life. A lawyer sought out across departments shows strong leadership, whilst a lawyer who moved offices in a company shake-up shows flexibility.

PowerPointless?

The aim of your presentation is to portray yourself in the best way possible. To do this you need to be the focus of your presentation and to command the undivided attention of the selection

panel. It is therefore probably best to leave the computer and slides at home. Whilst PowerPoint has its place in presenting, you really do need to be the star of your presentation and instead of PowerPoint backing up what you say, all the screen really does is take the focus off you and onto a series of slides.

Be prepared

Just as you would for a case, a contract or a client, you need to prepare for your interview. Remember to keep answers short, especially to the topics you're unsure of. And don't learn your answers by heart; it will sound much better if delivered in a spontaneous manner on the day.

You should aim to finish your presentation well under the allotted time. It is often better to give your panel too little information than too much – as the more you tell your panel, the less they will remember.

And finally, rehearsing your presentation to friends or family will ease nerves, familiarise you with the topics and areas that might come up in the interview and help you to get the tone right – engaging, professional, yet with confidence and conviction. Rehearsing is really important but you must stop short of learning it verbatim. Otherwise you run the serious risk of sounding awkward and contrived and that's assuming you don't forget your lines!

With the right mindset, lots of practice and following these few tips, success will hopefully be on the horizon. So good luck!

Jack Downton is the managing director of The Influence Business Ltd (www.TheInfluenceBusiness.com). He is a former colonel in the Royal Marines. You can email Jack at Jack.Downton@TheInfluenceBusiness.com.