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Executive summary

Research shows that most lawyers think they know what their clients want – but their clients don't always agree. How can lawyers and their firms truly understand the client perspective? How can they know what their clients are really asking for? What do lawyers need to know in order to get – and stay – hired?

What Clients Want from Law Firms combines the collective perspectives of clients in order to focus the lawyer's mind on their end goal – providing a service that people want and will pay for. Exploring dynamic new approaches to the client-lawyer relationship, the contributors take on topics as broad as ESG, diversity, ethics, and AI, revealing what clients really want from law firms.

Our opening chapter by Ian White argues that many external firms do not really understand what in-house counsel expect from their legal panel and the relationship they need to build and maintain with their corporate client. As an external lawyer, building a successful relationship with the general counsel is clearly critical if you want to work effectively with your client. However, many external law firms trip up because they don't put enough energy (and enthusiasm) into the relationship, missing the need to focus on building and maintaining that connection. There are some simple steps, says Ian, that you can adopt to ensure that you do this and provide added value to your client's business (and your own!). Chapter one also considers how best to work with the Board.

It stands to reason that no two businesses are the same, yet in-house lawyers frequently find that their external partners believe that if they've seen one company in a particular industry, they've seen them all.

Companies differ in more than just the kind of industry they operate in, and understanding what makes your client "tick" is as important as your legal advice being right. Values and mission are important indicators of how your client operates and should clue you into how they present themselves. Understanding what drives the organization, beyond profit, can make the difference between a one-off engagement and repeat business. An external

lawyer who demonstrates an understanding of their client's values in their advice and behavior is one who is more likely to be retained again and again.

Chapter two, by Adrienne Gubbay explores the essential importance of understanding your client's business. No GC expects a new external firm to get their business from day one. What they do want is a partner who is curious about what matters to their team and their wider business. This chapter explores how important understanding the business – not just the industry – is when advising in-house legal teams and organizations, and how this will drive repeat business and lasting relationships.

At first pass, we all look the same. We all went to college, then law school and undertook a variety of internships. Thereafter, we split – some to law firms and some to go in-house to work for companies. So, we should all know how to work well with each other. Fair, but somehow, over the years, there seems to have grown a larger disconnect between law firms and their counterparts in-house. There seems to have arisen a gap between the law firm and a GC, and with this gap distinct roles and responsibilities. Chapter three, by Terezka Gabka, explores how GCs and law firm lawyers differ, and how they can find common ground.

Business development is about more than just winning work. Yes, that is a big part of it. However, underlying everything is a relationship. Work is often won or lost because of a connection. In chapter four, Claire Rason shares some of the psychology of relationships, combined with her business development professional knowledge to help lawyers think about how to stay front of mind and build stronger relationships with GCs.

Panel selections are a fact of corporate legal life and, whilst they may be painful (for the law firm and the client), there is no getting away from them. What is often not appreciated by the law firm is the amount of time, care, and thought that goes into the panel process way before the tender process has even started. That is when the head of the client's legal function defines the organization's needs and how these are going to be met whilst balancing the expectations of the procurement team, amongst other internal stakeholders.

For a variety of reasons, clients will always be focused on the size of the panel and will want to ensure that they have the right law firms with the right technical skills and sector knowledge to be able to meet their requirements. The client will also want flexibility and competitive fees, but importantly the right cultural fit for their organization. In chapter five, Joanna Day brings to life the all-important factors that clients look for when

selecting the right law firms for their panel, what they really regard as “added value”, and how to prepare for a successful panel selection exercise.

Joanna returns in chapter six to look at billing and fees. If your systems and processes for managing billing and fees is working well, there should be no surprises. If your bill doesn’t match up to the purchase order or the amount the client has budgeted for, it not only means your invoice is going to be delayed but it also adds to the client’s administration – all factors that could strain the relationship. The rigidity of payment and accounting systems means it is important to get this right first time, whatever the size of your client organization. We all know that client requirements (and expectations) often change as the work progresses, so it is all too easy to get swept up in delivery and overlook readjusting the agreed fee. Clients would always prefer to readjust the budget at the right time rather than face a nasty surprise when the work is complete. Transparency is just that – be upfront and clear about what you are charging for and get approval for any additional work from the client first. In this chapter, Joanna offers tips and guidance on providing transparency around costs and really delivering value to build a solid and successful client relationship.

Chapter seven looks at matter management and collaborative working. Effective matter management demands collaboration and communication, both internally, with the business and legal department, and with external parties, such as outside counsel. Heidi Gardner looks at the issues.

What is at the cutting edge of client listening? In chapter eight, Claire Rason argues that the time has come for many firms to think about how to implement a step change in their client listening programs. In this chapter she writes about the shift from passive to active client listening. Active listening is deliberate and conscious. It is human-centered and it enables the listener to empathize and go deeper. In the context of client listening, it enables conversations to be client-led rather than question-led.

Chapter nine continues this theme, with Paul Roberts looking at the purpose of client listening and how to design a client program from the ‘outside-in’ – from the client’s perspective rather than the firm’s. Paul discusses the importance of broadening your sources of client voice (testimonials, complaints, conversations etc.) and how to ensure you are always listening.

Chapter 10, by Helen Hamilton-Shaw, looks at the issue of personal care. By prioritizing personal care, law firms build trust, loyalty, and lasting relationships with their clients. They can do this by showing empathy and

understanding (a genuine interest in the client’s wellbeing and understanding the challenges they face), transparent communication (agreeing on communication methods, keeping clients informed, and ensuring they know who is handling their case and who has overall responsibility), and an efficient intake process – organizing client requests promptly.

Chapter 11 by Thomas Santram looks at how to build lasting, positive relationships with clients. Thomas first explores the concept of what should be the goal of external counsel - the “trusted advisor” (much more than simply being an external legal service provider), and indeed an extension of the in-house legal department. Core to the relationship is understanding why general counsel hire external counsel, and the fact that people hire lawyers, not law firms. Thomas suggests some strategies for starting, growing, and maintaining the relationship, from before you are even hired, right the way to the first and subsequent files.

Chapter 12’s broad ambition is to review the evolution of the current law firm–corporate client relationship over the past 150 years and the conditions that animated it, then to re-imagine this dynamic in a constructive, hopeful sense, considering the conditions of today’s world and how we expect it to develop in an age of AI ubiquity and data centrality. Drawing from his collective law firm and in-house experience, Robert Dilworth reframes the relationship for today’s world with suggestions to make it more client- and human-focused in the broadest sense. The goal of updating and improving this relationship is to make it fitter for purpose – from the dual perspective of law firms’ clients and the clients’ stakeholders in civil society.