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Associates can provide value to partners, clients in myriad ways

The daily demands of meeting the partner's and the client's needs today may frequently tempt law firm associates to neglect the development of other skills complementary to being a good advocate that are necessary to providing current and future clients with the best possible service and value. But associates can and should do more than get the law right.

One great way to provide additional client value and to lay the groundwork for future new client business is to keep in touch on a professional as well as personal basis with friends, former law school classmates, former work colleagues and others who are working in-house in corporate legal departments.

It is a mistake to assume that just because an in-house lawyer is not currently in a position to offer new business, or because she went in-house to an existing firm client, there is little to be gained from actively working to maintain a professional and not merely a personal relationship with these contacts. Today's deputy associate general counsel may be tomorrow's general counsel. Simply talking to in-house counsel can provide invaluable insight into the kinds of skills an associate needs to develop in order to be a better practitioner and to attract and retain clients.

Recent conversations with two in-house lawyers — one an associate general counsel for a Fortune 100 company, the other general counsel of a growing technology company — demonstrate the value of this professional dialogue. Indeed, a few key lessons emerged: Associates should be interested in the work their clients and potential clients

are doing. Outside lawyers need to make the effort to learn about a company's business and to understand business as well as legal needs. Communication is critical. Help the client recognize that its business, and the lawyer's career as an in-house lawyer serving that business, is taken very seriously.

Both the Fortune 100 and the technology company lawyer had a lot to say about what they value from their outside lawyers. Both emphasized the need for outside lawyers to appreciate the importance of serving not just the client's legal, but also its business needs. The best legal service providers do more than simply explain what the law says or permits; they anticipate the client's business concerns and present a solution that allows the in-house lawyer to best serve the company's business interests.

The Fortune 100 lawyer remarked in particular upon a misperception that companies turn to large firms primarily because they think that's the only place to find the smartest and most experienced representation. In this particular inside counsel's view, great substantive lawyers

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BY MARTIN J. BISHOP AND WILLIAM J. KATT JR.

Martin J. Bishop is a partner, litigation department vice chairman and co-chair of the consumer financial services litigation practice at Foley & Lardner LLP. He can be reached at mbishop@foley.com. William J. Katt Jr. is an associate with Foley & Lardner and a member of the firm's business litigation and dispute resolution, appellate and environmental regulation practices. He can be reached at wkatt@foley.com.

are found in firms large and small and what sets the large law firms apart — what justifies the premium paid for their service — is the promise of the large law firm to always meet the client's needs on a 24/7 basis, whatever the time pressure. This means that if the large law firm cannot be trusted to provide timely, urgent service whenever the company requires it, the firm is failing to meet the client's needs.

Both in-house lawyers emphasized repeatedly the importance of outside counsel efficiency — particularly in the modern, cost-conscious economic environment. Both make a point of working directly with associates whenever the situation permits. The technology lawyer said that in the right circumstances he prefers having an associate manage the case with strategic input from a partner. Both lawyers made clear that they seek out outside counsel that can demonstrate efficiency through not just shrewd lawyering but shrewd management of legal resources and the outside counsel team.

For the Fortune 100 lawyer, the inability of many substantively good lawyers to efficiently manage the outside legal team's resources has been a particular

source of frustration. The outside lawyer may be rock-solid on the law, but if he or she lacks the ability to apply the client's money to best exploit his or her firm's resources, there are other substantively good lawyers out there who can surely be trusted to manage the client's legal business with appropriate organization, efficiency and oversight. In the end, finding smart, experienced lawyers is not the difficulty; finding outside counsel with the management and organizational skill to deliver cost-effective, efficient, quality service is the real challenge.

The technology lawyer emphasized the importance of communication and cost transparency in the modern business climate where virtually all clients are sure to be price-sensitive about things like litigation. He wants a preview of major tasks and weekly insight into the current projected spend on a particular matter, in order to avoid any cost surprises. He also expects his outside lawyers to understand his career background — in his case as a former litigator — so that they can better anticipate the kind of input he will want to have on various aspects of any given matter.

Comments like these demonstrate the importance of an associate's developing skills in client communication and handling matters efficiently in parallel with learning how to be a good advocate. In-house contacts — at whatever stage of their career — can offer much important insight right now about how to be the well-rounded, service-focused lawyer your current and future potential clients are looking for, even if they are not necessarily in a position to give you new business today.