

In Search of Management Talent

Support staffs are finding that professional service firms worldwide offer tremendous opportunities for career success.

BY NEASA MACERLEAN

For the Managing Partners' Forum, United Kingdom

Note: This article originally appeared in the MPF Global 500 Annual Report 2007, and it is reproduced here by permission of the Managing Partners' Forum.



Working as a marketer, technology consultant, or other support professional in a professional services firm has become a specialty in itself. Many firms have sizable teams that have become increasingly well paid, appreciated, and stimulated in the last few years.

“A PSF (professional services firm) is a great place to be if you thrive on intellectual stimulation and enjoy working with and through consensus,” said Jill King, Human Resources Director at Linklaters.

Tim Skipper, Director of First Counsel recruitment consultancy in the United Kingdom, is noticing dramatic improvements in the status of support staff year on year.

“The directors of marketing and HR are absolutely at the top table in no uncertain terms, in many firms,” Skipper said. “And marketing people are now able to engage with clients directly. That would never have happened five years ago.”

The professions have come a long way in the last decade. Ten years ago, some of the firms had a poor understanding of any profession bar their own – with the consequence that even the most brilliant of support staff were regularly jumping ship at 12 monthly intervals. But competitive pressures have since made firms re-evaluate. Firms are competing more for staff; clients are less loyal than they were and frequently put their work out for tender; and the media are more demanding, scrutinising these firms more and highlighting errors that are made.

A consequence of such growing pressures is that PSFs realise they need expert advice in order to survive. And they have to offer increasingly attractive packages to get the best people. So now there are seats on the board for some professional support staff, extraordinary opportunities as firms go global, good remuneration packages, and numerous instances of people who have been in situ for many years.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LARGE AND SMALL FIRMS

But it is very different to working for Fortune 500, FTSE 100, or other smaller more mainstream businesses. Andrew Woolfson, longtime Director of Knowledge Management at accountants BDO Stoy Hayward, speaks for many by saying: “In corporations, people tend to be told: ‘This is the way we are going to do things.’ In PSFs, you really need to get agreement.”

Charles Macleod, Director of Resources at accountants PricewaterhouseCoopers, explains why this is: “The vast majority of these organisations are partnerships with no obvious chain of command.” Firms are (or were created as) partnerships where each individual partner has his or her power base. On top of this, professions have much more day-to-day contact with clients than do makers of widgets – and this makes them prioritise the short-term demands of clients over every other call on their time. So, working in a PSF can be stressful, will often involve long hours, and it helps if support professionals are talented negotiators, diplomatic, and patient.

Firms are competing more for staff; clients are less loyal than they were and frequently put their work out for tender; and the media are more demanding.

CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Life is continuing to change fast in PSFs – and several issues are worth considering for those thinking of working in this field:

- **Remuneration packages are getting better.** Some of the bonuses paid to support professionals are “really significant,” said Skipper. More firms are using incentive schemes, based on results, on which to base bonus payments.

- **More support professionals are getting to the top levels of their firms.** Finance directors are the most likely ones to be on the board – but HR and marketing professionals are getting there, too. Many countries have restrictions on who can join a professional partnership, but these are being relaxed in some cases. And, for instance, when non-solicitors are allowed to go into partnership with solicitors in the United Kingdom (probably within a couple of years), the profession will be seen as a more attractive destination – as there still lingers, in some firms, a feeling that non-solicitors are second class citizens.
- **Opportunities for support professionals are expanding into new areas.** More firms are recruiting management specialists to be chief operating officers in

BONUS RESOURCES ONLINE

The Managing Partners' Forum (MPF) has also produced a *Management Diary* as part of its contributions to International Professional Legal Management WeekSM (PLMW) and this magazine. The 20-page publication spotlights the many challenges professionals managers face and is designed for daily use in chronicling and tackling on-the-job challenges. To download a copy of this unique management tool, visit the official PLMW Web site at www.plmw.org.



More support professionals are getting to the top levels of their firms. Finance directors are the most likely ones to be on the board – but HR and marketing professionals are getting there, too.

firms, according to Skipper. More firms are looking for specialist compliance and money laundering officers in response to the new laws introduced in this field around the world. Knowledge management experts are also increasingly sought after. In HR, there is a new

emphasis on learning and development. In marketing, more firms are looking for specialists in key account management and individual sectors (such as energy or automotive).

- **People are staying longer in firms.** “We’re seeing a remarkable level of stability and apparent satisfaction with their jobs,” said the authors of the latest staff survey from the International Legal Technology Association, James McKenna of Morrison & Foerster and Mal Mead of Sedgwick, Detert Moran & Arnold. Half of IT staff members have been with their firms for at least five years. “We don’t know all the reasons for this indication of job satisfaction, but we do know that law firms are generally good about providing staff training opportunities to their IT staff – with more than 70 percent providing time and/or reimbursement for outside training and certification opportunities.” King notes that career opportunities outside the PSF sector tend to be good – and five or six years of HR experience in a law firm will carry a lot of weight with investment companies in the city when they are recruiting.
- **Opportunities abound for those seeking work experiences abroad.** Macleod of PricewaterhouseCoopers



predicts that “you may see more centres of excellence created around the world to provide services such as technology and finance.”

- **Firms often prefer candidates who already have PSF experience.** “When we are recruiting finance directors, almost all the firms have wanted the comfort of someone who has worked in a professional services structure before,” said Skipper. However, demand from firms is outstripping the supply of people – and so more people are entering at higher levels without this background.
- **Disadvantages include the long hours** (“I work extremely long hours,” said King) and the simple fact that working with professionals does not suit everyone. People have to be good communicators in PSF. “You have

many, many more internal relationships to manage than would normally be the case,” said Macleod.

- **For the right people, the work can be fascinating.** King noted: “You need a lot of patience and resilience, but once you’ve won their respect, professionals are the most energising and challenging people to work with.” ♦

about the author

Neasa Macerlean is a journalist based in the United Kingdom who wrote this article on behalf of the Managing Partners’ Forum (MPF). Learn more about the MPF at www.mpfglobal.com.

MPF Panels share best practices on the issues that management teams in professional firms should focus on. The aim is for each Panel to consist of 50 to 500 senior professionals from leading organizations around the world.

ABOUT MPF



When the Managing Partners’ Forum (MPF) was formed in 1995, the title “managing partner” (MP) was unusual outside the largest

firms, and the greatest challenge was to help those elected to unfamiliar roles to learn more about what was required of them. Fast forward to the present, and much has changed:

- The level of internal awareness about the requirements of the role has increased dramatically, as most firms have had an MP for a decade or more.
- It is generally accepted that well-managed firms are more profitable and that clients tend to notice.
- Experts in finance, marketing, human resources, technology, operations, etc. are expected to get involved in management issues, with some beginning to be appointed to boards.

The MPF encourages a change in attitudes in favor of management. Its campaigns focus on three key themes:

- Getting management experts to the table. Insufficient time is devoted to management, and that management is too important to leave to managing partners.
- Giving them ammunition. Once internal acceptance is reached that a Board needs greater diversity in management skills, firms tend initially to promote internal candidates. However, few internal candidates were hired for a Board role, or have the skills or ammunition to cope. The MPF therefore organizes panels of

global leaders in marketing and other disciplines (see graphic below) to provide survey-based ammunition to help those promoted beyond their comfort zones to make valued contributions.

- **Attracting new talent.** The MPF Global 500 Annual Report is helping to attract new talent by setting the record straight. The report includes the first-ever fees and headcount data from the top 500 firms in 10 sectors; leader profiles; why professional managers’ contributions are so invaluable; and how management experts are increasingly well paid and respected.

For More Information

The MPF is widely recognized as the champion of practice management and the premier association for those involved in the management of professional firms, whether as managing partners, CEOs or members of management teams. Learn more by visiting www.mpfglobal.com.

