

Strategies for a Successful Legal Succession Plan Part II: Stretch Assignment, Special Project and Developmental Opportunities

By Princeton Legal Search Group, LLC

As we noted in the previous chapter, cross-training is a useful approach to building a succession plan. Other helpful strategies are stretch assignments, special projects and developmental opportunities.

Stretch Assignments and Special Projects

Stretch assignments and special project opportunities allow legal professionals to develop competencies or practice areas that make them more valuable to the organization. These opportunities strategically position professionals for growth, based on current competencies that may be lacking or on future company needs. Possible stretch assignments or special projects may include presenting at a board meeting or preparing documents outside the scope of the professionals' responsibilities, such as work on the annual report or participation in an employment investigation.

It is not uncommon to hear "board presentation" or "executive presence" as future areas of expertise within publicly traded companies. In our work, we often hear about or see lawyers who have been or would like to be selected for one of the following:

- Presenting to internal committees of the board of directors
- Leading internal committees
- Taking on a rotational assignment, such as in a division that needs their practice- area experience
- Presenting on a defined segment at the board meeting of a publicly held company
- Joining non-profit boards with the expectation they would present to the board or seek out skill sets, such as fund-raising or business development competencies, required for advancement.

Those opportunities may not require a promotion or additional compensation. Sometimes, organizations factor in stretch or special project assignments for professional development as part of the bonus program or give a bonus when the assignment is completed.

Developmental Programs

Developmental programs may be broader, varied or general learning opportunities that could propel a lawyer's career, add to his or her general marketability, or be part of a formal succession plan. Examples of developmental programs include securing a certificate; undergoing training, such as computer instruction, "understanding financials for the non-financial executive" or other non-CLE programs; participating on a task force or ad hoc group to learn a skill or be exposed to a different group of professionals, or creating a training manual.

Whether you are using stretch assignments, special projects or other developmental programs, the keys to your success will be whether you know what skills, experience or competencies your department requires and whether you can provide the appropriate developmental opportunities.

For example, we have seen lawyers grow beyond the legal profession and advance within the company. We have also seen situations where lawyers have developed outside the legal department and later wanted to return, only to be unable to do so because the position was filled.

In addition, we have seen legal professionals who did not have geographic flexibility and, despite the geographic limitation, were able to expertly steer their careers into the C-suite. In career navigation situations where a legal professional is taking a calculated risk beyond the legal department, it is wise to be sure everyone is clear about expectations. What will be the risks? Will his or her position be filled? What happens if the area, project or team does not succeed, and what are the consequences? The upside can be tremendously rewarding, but there are associated risks.

Questions To Consider

- If stretch assignments, special projects or rotations are available in other departments in your organization, how are they structured and what resources are offered? Meet with those department heads; they have a lot to offer.
- Are resources available through your human resources department, or outside the organization, to help you create a succession plan? Similarly, have professionals in your network had success with stretch assignments or developmental programs? Find out what worked and what roadblocks those professionals encountered.
- Could a volunteer assignment, perhaps an internal or external board or committee position, provide a professional development opportunity, such as in strategic thinking, executive-level presenting/speaking, business development or FDA regulatory filings?

- Are consulting resources available to help develop a stretch assignment program, rotational assignment or similar structure?
- If you are bringing more work in house, could this create a developmental opportunity?
- Might it make sense to invest some time and resources in developing a succession plan?

Summary

The goal is to identify career development paths based on your company's growth strategy and current and future needs, develop a strategy or strategies for lawyers to acquire skills and competencies, and retain critical professionals. Hands-on experience is a powerful teacher, and the expertise acquired builds confidence.

The payoffs of stretch, special project and developmental opportunities are tangible. We have met General Counsels who were able to step up, volunteer or convince senior management they were worthy of learning new competencies—legal and otherwise.

It is a fluid process that can become complex quickly, but if you provide structure and break the process into steps, you will be able to shape a roadmap for success.

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