

Cooley Counts on Culture—and Training—to Build Lawyers' Business Chops

The firm prides itself on an entrepreneurial approach, but that doesn't mean young lawyers are expected to learn business development all on their own.

By Patrick Smith
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Arthur Cooley founded the law firm that bears his name nearly a century ago. But as a major national firm, Cooley is still younger than its reputation—or its top 25 ranking in the Am Law 100—might suggest. Before 2005 the firm didn't even have an office on the East Coast.

That relative youth means Cooley has had some catching up to do on the client development front, an effort that's helped it establish itself as a go-to firm for such tech clients as Google, Facebook and Uber.

"We haven't been counsel for IBM or GM for 50 years," said Michael Attanasio, litigation department chairman at the Silicon Valley-based firm. "We didn't have that group of lawyers able to bill to those institutional clients."

That reality, according to Attanasio, helped fuel an aggressive, entrepreneurial culture when it came to business development and client acquisition. He said that attitude still permeates the firm today, including in the form of specific programs and training to help young lawyers succeed as business generators.

"The culture trickles down to our associates," he said. "And we are good about teaching people and technology skills to our associates."

That teaching doesn't just happen on the fly. Attanasio,

based in San Diego, said that while training and associate development have always been important to the firm, the last five years or so have given rise to a more formal, scalable program that adds consistency to the training process.

Attanasio said the firm organizes "BD+You," a monthly call that appears on everyone's calendar and introduces new concepts and tips for attorneys to use as they look to build and expand their practices.

"Our business development leader, Gene Gilmore, does educational sessions on topics like how to develop professional relationships with people you went to law school with, grew up with," he said. "They may be junior now, but in 10-15 years they could be decision makers. We need to be aware of that intersection."

"It's globally coordinated and locally delivered," said Gilmore, an attorney and professional coach whose title at the firm is director of professional development.



Michael Attanasio, Cooley

Gilmore has been building business development teams for a while. Before his time at Cooley, he was at Sidley Austin for close to seven years as West Coast director of training and development.

Cooley has been building its business development program for younger lawyers for about four years, Gilmore said. He said the firm's culture allowed him to do in four years what at another firm could take a decade.

"It's very much in the DNA of how we approach things here," he said.

Buttressing the monthly calls and training sessions are "academies" geared toward attorneys at specific points in their careers, such as new associate, midlevel and senior associate. The academies focus on different elements of the business development process that are most likely relevant to the attorneys at that point in their careers.

"The academies are a conversation," Gilmore said. "It's not a lecture."

An example Attanasio used was the "personal brand" academy that is given to midlevel associates. Having begun to develop a book of business, the attorneys are encouraged to start building their brands through speaking engagements, writing and networking events to showcase the expertise they have acquired over the years.

"We are in a very competitive environment," Attanasio said. "We know we have to invest in professional and personal development."

A team of 12 assists Gilmore in his professional development efforts. They specialize in everything from event planning to brand building and more.

"Eighty percent of it is pertinent to everyone," Gilmore said of the training efforts. "What makes us



Jason Doty/ALM

unique is that last 20% that we tailor to the individual."

The firm also uses more tactical tools, including Salesforce to manage client relationships, but Attanasio said such tools are only as good as the people using them.

"At the end of the day, it has to come down to how we utilize these tools and how we use them to develop relationships with our clients," he said.

Judging by Cooley's growth in recent years, the tools are being used with some success.

The firm went from 673 attorneys and about \$675 million in revenue in 2013 to almost 950 attorneys and close to \$1.23 billion in revenue in 2018.

Cooley has also outpaced the Am Law 100, the Global 100 and the Am Law 200 in revenue growth every year from 2015 to 2019, often at close to double the rate, according to ALM data.

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