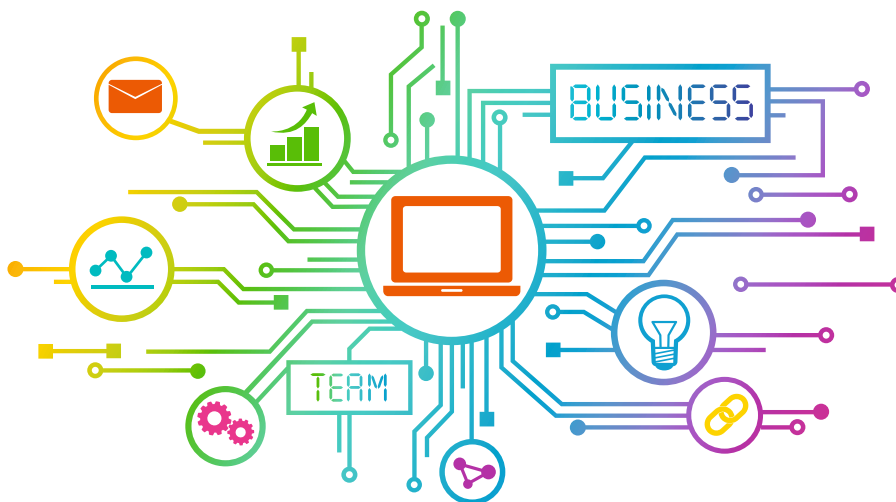


Management matters

Catherine Calder explains why modern management is key for today's most successful chambers



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Much is written about the modernisation of law firms but rather less about management advances in sets of chambers. Speakers at the Global Law Summit and the Modern Law Conference last month barely touched on the Bar, which is not generally considered to be at the forefront of business developments in the legal profession. However, the Bar—which arguably constitutes the very first Lawyers on Demand service, established some 500 years before the BLP initiative—is gearing up.



The SMT works collaboratively with the membership on the management and development of Chambers and particularly in contributing to the formulation and implementation of strategy. In Chambers' case, a primary objective is the retention and also the recruitment of first rate barristers and staff in order to enhance quality and diversity of practice—while building the expertise and service offered to clients—across the range of Chambers' practice areas. We have been able to recruit 14 new tenants since 2013.

Strategic approach

Most sets have now adopted a more strategic approach and many have imported managerial talent to take them forward. In illustration of this trend, three chief executive/director posts are currently advertised and the excellent Legal Practice Management Association, which caters predominantly for those in chambers managerial and administrative positions, now numbers around a hundred members. It is increasingly evident that first class management is vital for a first class set.

Some attribute the arrival of dedicated chambers management to a lack of business skills among members of the Bar. On the contrary: as Alistair MacDonald QC identified in his inaugural speech as Chair of the Bar in December 2014, “the intellectual resilience, the sheer ability to think our way through,” is a crucial resource in the face of challenge and change to the profession. But the modern management of a successful set is a demanding task and barristers must, of course, concentrate on their professional practices day to day.

Day to day management

Like many other sets, Serjeants' Inn Chambers has appointed senior figures to run the set as a business for the benefit of barristers, staff and clients. More unusually, this is without the involvement of a management committee of barristers. Of course, the set is led overall by the elected

joint heads of Chambers, who provide real vision and direction. However, they are both fully engaged with their clients and caseloads, so it is crucial that they and the membership have confidence in the team they have appointed to handle the everyday management of the set.

Chambers management presents a broad brief, encompassing strategy, finance, business development and marketing, PR, property management, commercial relationships, HR, IT, quality assurance and regulatory compliance. It also requires qualities including judgement, diplomacy, determination, persuasiveness, equanimity and the ability to drive the right things through. JFK's observation, “things do not happen, they are made to happen,” is particularly true of the management of a set of chambers, although the art of dealing with barristers, as with other professionals, is perhaps to know when to push and when to be patient in the pursuit of any given goal.

Devolved duties

Of course, different management structures work for different sets. Our view at Serjeants' Inn Chambers is that the necessary range of skills and attributes is unlikely to be found in one person. Equally, the duties involved are unlikely to constitute one person's workload. Therefore, we have a senior management team (SMT), led by the business director and also comprising the senior clerk and the director of client care.

Clerking matters

It is crucial that the senior clerk is at the heart of the team. The case for bringing in business professionals is clear but for best results they will work hand in hand with the clerking team: good clerks, with knowledge of individual counsel and clients often gleaned over decades, are a critical part of the package as far as the instructing solicitor is concerned and are central to the success of a set overall.

Any management team is paid to make decisions and must do so, but successful management requires buy-in from barristers and staff. This is true of any organisation, but is, of course, reinforced in chambers by the need to balance the interests of each member as a self-employed, sole practitioner with that of the set as a whole, increasingly treated as a collective—if not yet a corporate—for commercial and regulatory purposes at least. Sets of chambers are also unusual, although not unique, in consisting of so many articulate and independently minded people.

Inspiring surroundings

For Serjeants' Inn Chambers, a bold move to new purpose-designed premises on a single floor of the iconic Reuters Building in Fleet Street has had a major impact. Putting the same people in a different building has changed the culture of the set, dramatically improving communication and cohesion.

While there are clearly many benefits and charms to the traditional model of a set of rooms within an Inn, for us a relatively small but smart and efficient office space works well. Desk-sharing and hot-desking arrangements, together with use of IT, operate to reduce cost to the individual barristers and to increase their ability to work flexibly according to personal preference and responsibilities. The partially open-plan layout lends itself to an informal, on-going dialogue, which assists barristers and staff alike.

This dialogue is complemented by multiple formal channels of communication, including an intranet with practice team discussion groups plus notice boards, news feeds and videos of internal training sessions and meetings. This leads to a level of engagement which is illustrated by a 96% tenant response rate to a recent internal survey on client care and practice development, despite the fact that it ran to 50 questions.

Sophistication & innovation

But this is just one of numerous examples of the sophisticated approach which now characterises many sets of chambers. Indeed there is potential for a more innovative dynamic at the Bar than among law firms, simply because it is so much easier to get things done. Barristers' chambers are

frequently smaller, more agile organisations and they are made up of lawyers who have been drawn to the more flexible side of the profession and who perhaps tend towards a more progressive perspective as a result.

“We are about to introduce the first Chambers' app with time recording & other functionality”

Certainly there is no shortage of ideas or initiatives: we are about to introduce the first Chambers' app with time recording and other functionality. Elsewhere, for example, Doughty Street broadcasts its seminars via Youtube and Richmond Chambers offers a paper-free system, while Clerksroom, which has for many years operated effectively as a “virtual” set, has recently introduced a sophisticated online triage system for public access work.

Jeremy Hopkins of Clerkingwell Consulting is well placed to comment,

having made the rare journey from traditional chambers management to the start up and growth of a successful alternative business structure in Riverview Law. He notes that the “inherent flexibility and leanness of the chambers model leaves the Bar strongly positioned to meet the challenges of the rapidly evolving environment, but top class leadership and management are vital to ensure these characteristics are turned into genuine competitive advantage”.

The notion that a legal career—with all its focus on form and precedent—inhibits innovation and progression is far from true, either at the Bar or across the rest of the profession. At Serjeants' Inn Chambers, and no doubt elsewhere, the combination of intellect and imagination, which is brought to bear on our cases is also applied to the management of the set. It is this approach which creates the “openness to change and continuous improvement,” which Yasmin Lambert of RSG Consulting identified in the recent *Financial Times Innovative Lawyers Report* as crucial to the successful, modern legal businesses of the future. **NLJ**

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THE BARRISTERS' BENEVOLENT ASSOCIATION

The Barristers' Benevolent Association exists to support, help and comfort those members of the Bar in England and Wales and their families and dependants who are in need, in distress or in difficulties.

During the recent past we have helped barristers and their families in every circuit, often saving not only dignity but careers.

We are not nearly as well-known in the profession as we would like, and there are possibly people who qualify for our help but aren't aware of our existence... we also feel that there are other people who would be willing to contribute to the welfare of their less fortunate colleagues but who are also unaware of us.

Contact Susan Eldridge on 020 7242 4761 for further details or visit our website at www.the-bba.com

