

Top 10 Personal Career Concerns for The Next Generation of Accounting Firm Leaders

As we enter the third year of the BKR Future Leaders program, it's extremely encouraging to see young professionals progress through to partner and form relationships with their clients which will see them become an irreplaceable part of their client's trusted team for years to come.

In many firms however, including those who have a partner track for their senior managers, some recurring development challenges still remain.

Since 2012, the Passport to Partnership™ study has spoken with over 400 senior managers about what they feel are the principal personal challenges standing between them and accelerated career progression.

This is a summarised countdown of the senior manager's (Age 20-40 across the UK, US and Europe) most cited concerns about their long term career development within the accounting firm that they current work for.

10. 'We don't know, what we don't know'

This relates to individuals who do not know where to begin in order to progress their careers.

The research shows that many partners believe that a demonstration of certain requisite skills or traits are simply 'common sense' and do not need communicating.

Many senior managers are at odds with this opinion and feel the need to have what is expected of them 'mapped out' so that they can ensure their focus is on working to demonstrate the specific skills that the partners desire of them beyond simply spending all their time to 'get the deliverables out the door'. (compliance work).

9. 'We don't know how to write a proposal document'

Many managers are encouraged to network, market themselves and rain-make, but without much formal or ongoing coaching on how to do so.

The study has shown that the majority shy away from these opportunities due to not knowing how to handle to complete process of winning a new client especially it seems, the composition of a proposal document.

Partners have tried to allay those fears by assuring the managers that they will take care of things such as the proposal. This has only served to remove the incentive of winning the work and the sense of ownership of the process away from the manager.

8. 'We need Mentors'

How did they do it? Why did they do it? When did they do it? What did it take in order to do it? What happened when it all went wrong?

These are the major (unanswered) questions that managers have of their superiors in accounting firms regarding progression to partnership and the commercial challenges that follow. They are (silently) looking for personalised guidance to provide the answers.

7. 'Hourly Billing Is Senseless'

One of the most revealing results from the survey was that a large number of managers are 'paying their dues' in order to receive a financial education before choosing to leave public practice and enter into industry to use their skills there. The main reason given was the predominant hourly billing model which some saw as 'archaic', some as 'limiting' and others as 'unethical'.

6. 'Where Are the Boundaries?'

Can I invite a partner out to lunch and ask the questions that are on my mind? Can I just go ahead and win a new piece of work at the price I want to charge for it rather than the discounted price that the partners tell me I won't be able to get more than for it? Can I choose the CPD/CPE I'm most interested in? Can I contact the client without a partner's permission?

Here is just a small selection of evidence of senior managers not knowing the unwritten rules of the firm in which they work.

5. 'What Does A Partner Think About And Need To Know On A Daily Basis?'

Most managers are not even aware of the Cash-flow, Billing, Collections, HR, Payroll, Client and New Business challenges that a partner faces on a daily basis, never mind being able to think in a commercially aware way about the firm as a business. Do we really want them to acquire this knowledge only when they become partner?

4. What Do I Want To Be Remembered For?

Today's aspirational managers are looking for more than just to be 'an accountant'. They want to find passion and purpose in their work. They want to leave a legacy.

Firms face a 'retention of talent' threat in those who find that their 'purpose' cannot be achieved within their firm and so go to seek it in a competitor's practice. The need to know our team and get close to them has become even greater than ever.

3. What Is My Career Path?

High up on the list was the desire for Managers to be able to see the carrot at the end of the stick at each stage of their development rather than working to open ended, non-specific promises from the partners that '*one day, all this will be yours*'.

Managers are looking for performance criteria to be linked to specific benefits. They are looking for a criterion to describe what makes an outstanding leader, manager, partner, associate, department head etc. at their firm.

They feel this suggests that the firm has identified, believes in and therefore requires; a certain ethos and credo that they can align with their own value system and emotionally invest in for the long term well-being of the firm and their own personal career alike.

Otherwise they are often seen to consider they ‘Why don’t I just set up my own firm?’ question.

2. Confidence and Know-How in How to Network

They often say that it is the ‘soft’ skills that are the hard skills for technical professionals and that view is echoed by the next generation of leaders. It’s not that they don’t want to network, it is that they don’t know how.

Popular opinion points to internal role-plays in a safe and supportive environment as being the best initial training ground to develop this competency.

1. ‘How Do I Build My Own Prospect Pipeline?’

As with the above, SMs (Senior Managers) want to win work and gain the buzz of helping a client reach their professional and personal aspirations. The process of doing so is not only a mystery to them, but so is the simple identification of who they could approach and how in the first instance.

This confidence builder (The ability to build their own pipeline of prospective clients/fees) has been proven to bring out other leadership skills by association as managers feel that once they know how to control their own financial destiny in the firm and become a profit centre rather than a cost centre; they then feel confident in committing to ownership of the practice little by little.

However partnership is structured in your firm, make sure that each one of these challenges is evaluated by you and the partner you report to now to ensure that both you and the firm are able to define a clear path of progression which pays dividends for all parties and the short and long term alike.