Becoming the Go-To Professional

Steven Pearce & John Timperley

Introduction

This project has its origins in the conversations we have held with senior professionals in the accounting, legal, consulting, real estate and financial services sectors – people who are recognised by their clients and peers as being the 'go to' professional in their field.

It has been our privilege to work with, and coach, these impressive individuals and we have sought in these pages to capture what these people believe in, and do, to create their own 'go to' professional reputation.

The subject matter is not about marketing or business development, or technical competence - it is more holistic than that. Rather, it is about what makes people distinctive in their chosen profession, and what makes them attractive to clients and work referrers. Here we are focusing on the importance of 'personal brand' - the reasons why those who have work to give choose one professional for the assignment over another.

How did we do it? We used a set of questions common to each interview in order to draw out any strong themes and insights from our collective discussions. We talked to a range of personality types with differing styles of doing business, honed specifically to the markets in which they operate. However, there is no doubt that there are some common denominators - the DNA of a 'go to' professional if you like - that can be analysed and, to an extent, copied. Wherever possible we have captured the verbatim comments of our interviewees as this gives a sense of personality and 'real life' perspective. The choice of words, to our mind, often conveys the style of the individual better than any commentary.

The big point is this: What can you learn, and apply, from the comments and insights you read in this document? It is a goldmine of advice, tips and approaches that are working for highly respected professionals, and there will be something on every page that you can use in your own situation.

A final comment we would make is that the content of this report represents only a small proportion of the wealth of insight, challenge and perspective that the 'go to' professionals provided to us. We will continue to publish our synthesis of the comments from our panel of 'go to' professionals, but in the meantime we hope you find it an enjoyable, stimulating and, above all, thought provoking read.

With grateful thanks to all of the 'go to' professionals who have been kind enough to give their time and their views freely to us.

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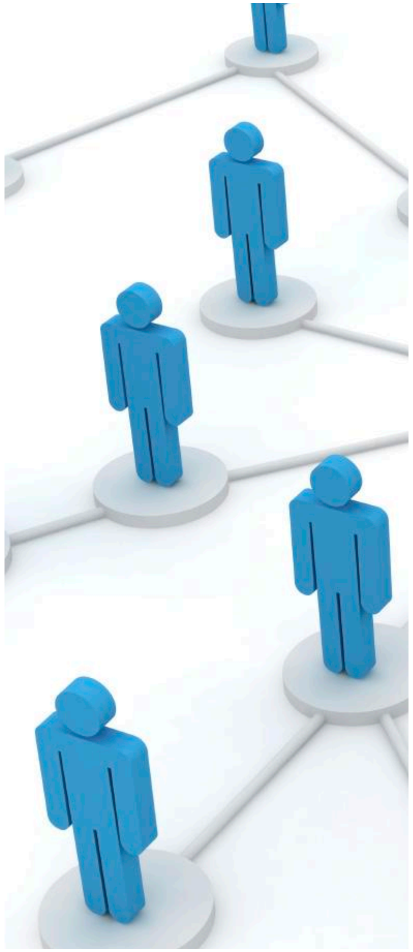
Network



Whether it is their external network of contacts, client and work referrers, or their internal colleagues, the senior professionals we interviewed all recognised the vital importance of building alliances and trusted relationships with those in a position to influence. However, it's by no means a self-serving approach - what came through to us from the comments was a genuine interest in being of help to others.

Whilst we interviewed a range of personality types operating in a range of professional services sectors, we found that there were certain principles that underpinned these senior professionals' network building success. We've drawn these out below and highlighted each principle with comments from an interviewee to illustrate the thinking behind it.

A senior professional's network is critical to their success.

"My network is absolutely and completely the most important thing I have got - it is the provider of new work, the protector of existing relationships and my own personal safety net within the firm."

There is always more you can do to be more structured and disciplined but balance it with keeping it real and spontaneous.

"I could probably have been more structured about it, and if I had my time over again I wish I had done more to capture relevant details about my contacts, for example wife's name, kids, likes and dislikes, football club supported, etc. It has become too difficult to retain all this in my head as my network has developed – and the small details like these can count for a lot when you are building a relationship – it shows you are taking a sincere interest and differentiates you from those who simply don't care enough."

Major on those contacts where the 'chemistry' is right… don't try to push water uphill - unless you have to.

"If you find people in your network that you really get on with, and are relevant to your core business, major on them, because if you like them and they like you they are going to give you insights, new work and contacts – if the relationship is right they will generally go out of their way to help you."

The secret to relationships? Get onto the personal agenda of the other person - find the 'commonalities'.

"Do the easy stuff - find things that you have in common with your contacts. That's the 'glue' that binds you together and gives you the excuse to build and maintain the relationship. It could be anything from working for the same organisation in the past, supporting the same teams, having the same attitude to life, experiencing the same difficulties, and simple commonalities such as kids of a similar age and so on."

Give of yourself… be a support without the need for return.

"I try to help other people with their network. I spend a lot of my networking time asking my contacts whether it would be helpful if I introduced them to, or hook them up with, particular individuals who I think could be useful to them. It is a way of adding value that's not obvious – there's not always an overt cross-selling angle to it - but it is to the distinct benefit of the contact in their particular situation."

Add some real value to your contacts by leveraging your network for their benefit.

"We are bit frightened of sharing our network but if you don't do anything with your network and share it, you are never going to leverage it effectively. So, if I keep my network to myself I would derive probably less than 50% of the benefit that we as a firm could get from my contacts. Everyone will say that their network is important, but are you really investing the time in developing it?"

Stick with them through the bad times.

People remember the things that you have done for them when they are most in need, if they have got a crisis to deal with, a worrying issue that involves them personally, a redundancy situation or maybe even something very personal to them. If you are the one to be there for them when they need you, the memory sticks in a positive way. You strengthen your relationship massively as a result.

"My network is absolutely and completely the most important thing I have got - it is the provider of new work, the protector of existing relationships and my own personal safety net within the firm."

Make your contacts look good to others...

We asked our interviewees for ways in which they made their contacts ‘look good’ in their organisation or sector. Here are some of their comments:

1. Tailoring documents to their house style so that they do not need to spend time amending.
2. Alerting them to issues that they can ‘flag up’ to their Board or others in the organisation.
3. Providing information that they can present as their own.
4. Thinking one step ahead by project managing what needs to be done next by the contact and telling them about it - or even doing it, if appropriate.
5. Ensuring that they have all the relevant information for their internal briefings and meetings.
6. Providing a status summary of work and budgets in a way they can present it to others.
7. Giving them access to relevant elements of our know how.
8. Helping them, appropriately, to meet their internal deadlines, e.g. for reporting.
9. Without breaking confidences, giving them ideas that they can propose implementing in their own organisation.
10. Meeting with them to plan the elements of their work schedule that involve you so that they can be seen to be in total command of the situation.

“If people think you are really busy and you are calling them there is ‘wow factor’ in that, particularly as you get more senior. It is just about saying to them ‘I care …’, which I do.”

Never drop anybody.

“You don’t need to keep every single ball in the air all the time - you just need to keep everything a little bit off the ground. I hand write a list of people to call when I have a spare moment. Of these people, 50% will be live issues and things that are ongoing and 50% will be people I have not spoken to for a while and need to catch up with.”

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Remember, the real networking is the one-to-one stuff…

You can do as much networking as you want at seminars, conferences, etc but those who are adept at networking know that the real relationship building takes place on a one-to-one basis. It is here where you build the chemistry; ask the questions to uncover the personal and business agendas. It’s about listening to the response and act accordingly by way of professional insight and advice or offering support in some way from yourself or others. The key question is ‘how often are you getting into that position where you are one-to-one with those contacts in your network important to you?’

People move around - follow them in a professional way.

One of our interviewees told the story of how he had helped a new Finance Director settle into his new organisation by asking his firm’s Research Department to prepare a sector and organisation analysis so that the new FD could get up to speed quickly on the issues. As this was a listed company, there was plenty of information in the public domain and, together with some quality comments from the firm’s sector specialists, the Finance Director was armed with all the necessary background to perform effectively at Board level. So much so that the Board members commented that the brand new FD probably knew more about the sector and the business than the vast majority of the organisation’s senior management team! That’s one way to not only make a contact look good, but also to add real value that will be repaid over the longer term.

“It is so hard to keep your network going because often individual actions are small, can be trivial, and are usually non-urgent. For all of these reasons it is counter-intuitive for senior professionals to focus on them on a day-to-day basis.”

Look after them…

“I spend a lot of my time trying to find people jobs. If I get them a job in a client, that secures it. If I get them a job in a target client for us… how good is that! It’s about taking a genuine interest in them and their situation and, wherever possible and appropriate, doing something to support them. There is an argument it is what business life – and life in general - is all about.”

Keep it up… and do something every day

“It is so hard to keep your network going because often individual actions are small, can be trivial, and are usually non-urgent. For all of these reasons it is counter-intuitive for senior professionals to focus on them on a day-to-day basis. The only problem is that if you don’t, you miss the opportunity - the moment passes - and the relationship that could have been built is left to stagnate. The trick is to set aside some time every day to think about your contacts and take relevant and appropriate actions to maintain dialogue. It is not easy; it requires discipline, but that’s what sets those people who are excellent apart from those who have the capability but no focus.”

Start early…

“Build your networks when you are young, particularly if you are going to stay in the same sector and geography.”

Many of the senior professionals we met told us of relationships that they had formed when they were trainees together, in the same team as juniors, worked on the same client as managers or newly qualified, kept in touch from university, developed relationships from training programmes they attended together, and so on. In answer to the question ‘when do you start building your network?’ the answer has to be ‘now’! The ability to build strong and warm relationships with people in a position to provide mutual support and help cannot be underestimated. There is much research to underpin the widely held thought that relationships are often the ‘x factor’ in winning work and attracting new clients, all other factors being equal.

“Build your networks when you are young, particularly if you are going to stay in the same sector and geography.”

Get yourself a professional role that opens doors and gives you credibility

“Chairing a CEO’s Club really attached credibility to me and I started to build strong board-level relationships through it. It was important that the events went well, that the speakers were excellent and the time spent for the CEO attendees was worthwhile. But once that has been established, I became associated with something of quality, and that opened doors and fast tracked the business relationship building process – even at the most senior level.”

“Chairing a CEO’s Club really attached credibility to me and I started to build strong board-level relationships through it.”

Some food for thought...

- Is your contact network as wide and as strong as you would like it to be?
- How proactive are you in building your network and doing something most days to nurture it?
- How well do you know the ‘personal agendas’ of your most important contacts?
- What was the last piece of ‘added value’ you gave to a contact of yours?
- How many one-to-one networking discussions have you had over the last two months? Is it enough?
- Which people have you failed to follow up effectively after they have moved role or organisation? Can you do anything about it now?
- Which people have you helped through adversity over the last six months?
- What marks would you give yourself out of ten for the structure and discipline of your approach to networking?

Professional Persona

Authority. Presence. Gravitas. These are the sort of words our interviewees used to describe the almost mystical aura of a top-flight professional. But far from being born with these qualities, most of our interviewees acknowledged that to an extent, they were cultivated. Indeed, there does seem to be an element of performance about professional life – clients expect their key advisers to behave in a certain way, and a key element of success is an individual's ability to inhabit that professional persona, day in, day out.

Exude calmness - especially under pressure

One of our interviewees spoke admiringly of a colleague:

"There can be insane pressure; the deal can be right on the brink of collapse; yet this guy sits in the middle of it all and exudes calmness. He never shouts, he never panics, he just looks the client in the eye and says "We'll find a solution. I'm not sure what the solution is yet, but there's no doubt that we'll find one." And clients absolutely love that."

Sometimes, especially when the going gets tough, a professional's ability to control his or her emotions is critical in maintaining client trust. The ability to be measured, even in the face of mounting pressure or provocation, is a prized asset.

This aspect of professional "demeanour" is just as important when interacting with colleagues as with clients.

"It's something I'm constantly aware of," said a law firm partner. "Giving the impression that I always have time available for people. I don't have lots of time available, but I need to give the impression that I do. Just stopping what I'm doing and looking up from the screen when people come into my office, that sort of thing. There's a temptation when you're up to your ears in a deal to give off a vibe that says 'Don't talk to me.' I have to fight against that."

Calmness can help when working across cultures too.

"I deal with a very varied investor base, and sometimes things get lost in translation. We're working across multiple time zones, sometimes you're very tired, and you have to resist the temptation to snap at people. Many's the time I've wanted to shout down the line, but you don't. You have to keep it calm and collected, and just keep slowly negotiating for the benefit of your client."

Nice beats smart (most of the time)

The academic bar continues to be raised for entry into the top professions. Intelligence, then, of itself, is not a differentiator in this marketplace. It is the price of admission.

When we asked our top performers to identify the characteristics of the junior stars of their teams, intellectual ability was scarcely mentioned.

Niceness was. Over and again.

"It's so important to be personable. Can you put people at ease? Are you fun to be around? Self-centredness is the first thing that turns me off someone. I'll hire, and promote, the personable over the brilliant every time."

"One of the key things I tell all my juniors is that they need to treat people with respect. Especially in their dealings with administrative and support staff, it is vital to be polite, and show a bit of empathy."

This isn't just good advice on a human level; it also makes good business sense. There is a limit to what you can achieve as sole practitioner; most of the time, if you work for a large firm, your objectives will only be met by working with and through other people. Becoming known as someone who is a pleasure to work with, appreciative and helpful, will often ensure that your work gets prioritised over other people's.

A law firm partner reflected ruefully on what it takes to succeed in his firm. "Unless you've got the legal ability of Lord Hoffmann - which I don't, and I don't know anyone who does - you need something else. People have to find you easy to use, like working with you, and you need to show a bit of humility. There's no point in telling people bluntly, 'Hey, you're wrong.' A better way is to say "I'm struggling a bit with this. Can you help me see where you're coming from?' It isn't that antagonistic 'I'm right and you're wrong' approach. A lot of people come unstuck with that."

One individual, however, acknowledged that other approaches are sometimes necessary.

"I am impressed with people who are, occasionally, not nice. But they are people whose intentions are good. Their hearts are in the right place. Sometimes, just sometimes, you have to be a jerk to get something done."

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Think ‘quality’ over ‘quantity’ in meetings

Few professionals mind the sound of their own voice. They are generally articulate and amusing and are not short of an opinion or three.

This has its dangers, though, particularly early on in your career. Junior professionals can mistakenly feel that the best way to make their presence felt - at meetings or in conference calls - is to make a contribution, any contribution, whether considered or not.

“There’s a world of difference between someone who makes a pertinent, wholly appropriate intervention in meetings, and someone who is indiscriminate. Saying something just for the sake of it, or repeating yourself without realising it, is a sure fire way of destroying your reputation.”

One of our interviewees recalled Denis Thatcher’s advice. When asked why he hardly ever made a public statement or intervention, he replied:

“It’s always been my view that it’s preferable to say nothing and be supposed an idiot than to open my mouth and remove all doubt.”

Master ‘power listening’

Listening doesn’t come naturally to a lot of advisers. That’s why those professionals who really work at this skill can make a startling impact on clients.

“A colleague of mine makes an excellent first impression on clients by asking the most general questions - ‘why do you feel you need our help with this?’ for example, the sort of bland question I would never dream of asking - and then listening incredibly hard to the answer. And he gets all sorts of compelling stuff out of them which my more forensic style wouldn’t get near because he seems to be starting the relationship with a blank sheet of paper and a desire to genuinely listen and engage. It seems real, not as if this is something he’s been through a hundred times before. Even though he has.”

Candid professionals will acknowledge that they often give the illusion of listening when in fact they are doing nothing of the sort. Instead of listening, they are challenging (“I’m trained to look for inconsistencies, and that’s what I tend to do when clients are speaking to me”). Or rehearsing. (“Especially if I have to give bad news, I will be running through my mind the formulation of words likely to give the least offence.”) Or dreaming. (“There are times, particularly late on a Friday night and someone is ranting down the phone at you, that you just sort of switch off...”)

“Seize every opportunity that comes your way. Volunteer for things, even 5 minute slots at department meetings. Yes, at first it is terrifying, but you learn to control that over time, it isn’t as paralysing as it is at the beginning. And the rewards are tremendous.”

If any of these scenarios sound familiar, then your listening needs some work. The best approach we heard about in terms of transforming the quality of one’s listening, was from the adviser who says he approaches every conversation with a client as if he knows, at the end, he will have to summarise it and play it back using as far as possible the client’s own words.

Whether or not he actually gives the summary, his listening is altogether more focussed than it would otherwise be.

Look at ease on a platform

Even in this digital age, the old-fashioned speech - perhaps more conversation than lecture in tone these days - still has the power to get you noticed.

Our top professionals realise this.

“To be able to give a decent speech on a technical subject you really have to understand your material. It’s a great discipline. Clients respond really well to clear guidance in presentations. They will go ‘Oh, I’d like to work with him because he seems able to give a clear answer.”

“I’ve had many work instructions that have come off the back of conference speeches. I have never had the same return on articles I have written. If there is one skill that is essential for raising your profile, it is the ability to pull together a talk and deliver it with confidence.”

“Some people shy away from it, but I’ve always given talks. They might be internally, to the real estate department for example, or externally at conferences. I did it from an early stage, and was consequently sharing conference platforms with people who were much more senior than me. It gives you a profile in the market place.”

It’s important not only to speak persuasively about your specialism, but about yourself. This is an area that many professionals view with some distaste. One of the people we interviewed wanted a change of direction in his career and found himself up against other much better qualified candidates.

“In the end, what got me the job was not my experience, which was limited, but the fact that I could sell myself. I wasn’t the poster child for the job, but I had a clear sense of my own capabilities and could talk about them persuasively.”

So how do you acquire a smooth, confident presentational style?

“Seize every opportunity that comes your way. Volunteer for things, even 5 minute slots at department meetings. Yes, at first it is terrifying, but you learn to control that over time, it isn’t as paralysing as it is at the beginning. And the rewards are tremendous.”

Demonstrate your core values in every daily interaction

Many of our interviewees made the point that success comes not just from what you do, but the way you do it.

Consider the following scenario.

Partner A walks over to the desk of associate B and asks if she would mind helping him out on an over-running project.

As he starts to speak, she raises her hand, gestures towards a pile of files and says "I'm really sorry, I'd love to help, but I'm snowed under at the moment. Can I get back to you tomorrow?"

Then the partner walks towards the desk of associate C, who is on the phone. She sees him coming and tells her caller "You'll have to excuse me, a partner has just come in. I'll get back to you later." And then she gives her full attention to the partner and clarifies exactly how she can help with his piece of work.

A partner recounted this scenario to us. Not surprisingly he had a higher opinion of the second associate, but the really interesting thing was that when, out of curiosity, he viewed the utilisation rates of the two, he found that **associate C was actually three times as busy as associate B.**

"Some people work hard at looking like they are working hard, others work hard at being helpful. It is a difference in attitude and values, and can prove decisive for your career."

Time and again, interviewees told us they liked to see people demonstrate their personal values as they build their career. Whether that is about the giving of straight, open and direct advice, or the importance an individual attaches to playing for the team, a personal "code of conduct" is seen as crucial.

And although these are of course very well paid professions, placing too high a value on financial reward alone did not predicate a successful professional.

One highly placed adviser, with a distinguished career over 20 years and three continents to reflect on, spoke about the power of personal values.

"You have to have the right values. And share the firm's values. If you're only in it for the money, you might have some short term wins. Catch a wave. Get some luck. Fool some of the people some of the time. But you won't build a sustainable career at this level."

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“There’s a world of difference between someone who makes a pertinent, wholly appropriate intervention in meetings, and someone who is indiscriminate. Saying something just for the sake of it, or repeating yourself without realising it, is a sure fire way of destroying your reputation.”

Some food for thought...

- How obvious is it to those around you when you are feeling under pressure?
- When did you last say something you later regretted in a public forum?
- How accurately can you recall the last important conversation you had?
- What impression do you make on an audience as a public speaker?
- What are your core values, and do you think the people who work closest with you would be aware of them?

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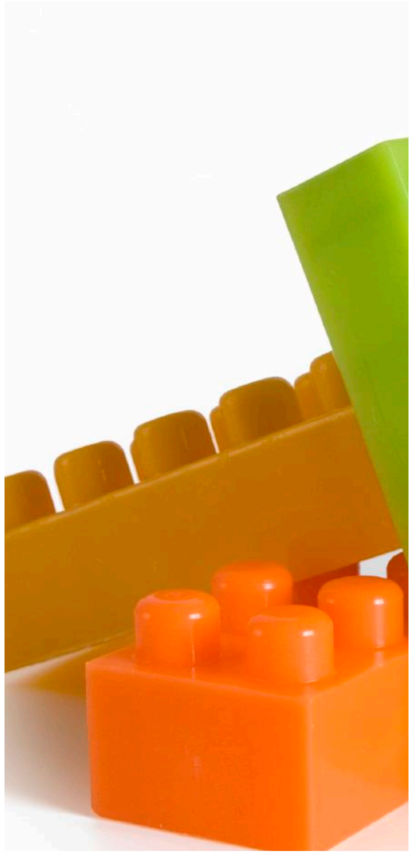
Practice



It is often said that, at the top level of professional services, what you know, or your technical area of specialism, is a “given”; it is the other aspects of professional life that need development. This may be so, but our interviewees were very aware of the need to position their expertise, and to constantly update and re-focus their personal practices.

Here are some views that show that, for the Go-To Professional, a personal practice is very much a work in progress.

Understand your own strengths and weaknesses and find a specialism to fit

“My mother always said I was an argumentative little sod, so litigation suited me down to the ground.”

“I always took great pride in compiling my school’s cricket score sheets when I was a kid. Detail, numbers are where I’m happiest. Hence tax was a perfect specialism for me. My organisational skills are atrocious. I couldn’t handle paper constantly piling up on my desk. But tax isn’t like that - it’s about detail, and it’s about the law.”

“I suppose I’m a bit of a free spirit. I don’t like repetitive work and I don’t like a lot of regulations. So funds suits me perfectly; it’s a bit like the wild west...”

There is a surprising amount of variety in the nature of the work across different practices in a professional firm. Our interviewees felt that not enough time is spent in the embryonic stages of a career thinking about fit – one’s natural suitability, or lack of it, for the kind of work a particular practice will entail.

“I remember people making their choice on a hunch – what was fashionable at the time, or what people thought would make money in a decade. By and large those people have either left the profession or are fairly bored Partners. Fit is crucial - understanding your own strengths and weaknesses, even in your early 20s, is an important element of deciding where to specialise.”

Questions to ask before committing to a specialisation

Do I prefer repetitive or non-repetitive transactions?

Do I prefer “black and white” matters, or ones where I am constantly required to provide interpretation?

Do I seek the adrenaline rush of concentrated periods of activity, or a degree of predictability?

Do I like to travel extensively? Where are the geographical existing and emerging markets for this specialisation?

Do I like working to acute time pressure?

Do I actually enjoy spending time with the kind of clients this field attracts?

Become a subject matter expert - early

Even in the most arcane areas of specialism, you are not likely to have the field to yourself. So the more knowledge you can acquire at an early stage of your career, the more edge you will have over your competitors. Unfortunately, there will be many competing demands on your time at this stage of your career, as one of our interviewees lamented:

“If I had my time over again, I would definitely put a bit more effort into reading around the subject, attending conferences, that sort of thing. Instead, I was too busy having a good time...”

There are other ways of acquiring specialist knowledge. A well-chosen secondment can help.

“I remember seeing the note from one of the Partners saying ‘Do you want to go on this secondment?’ And it was to a government agency at a time when I knew they were formulating a new set of regulations. And I thought, if I go, I’m going to be the first in the industry to understand the new set up, and to know it from the inside. So I went, and it did indeed turn out like that, and the knowledge I gained from that secondment gave me a position of market leadership...”

And whilst acquiring market leadership early is clearly a smart move, keeping up to date with marketplace trends and developments is a lifelong habit for many of our interviewees.

"We all know the Partners who are trading on stuff that was current ten years ago. It's possible to coast like that, but ultimately not smart. You're relying on personal relationships to pull you through, when in this market, the business drivers are all around excellence, immediacy and genuine insight. You've got to make keeping up to date a systematic – but manageable – part of your life."

It's not just what you know - It's how you communicate what you know

"Clients don't ring me because of how much I know. Clients ring me because they know I'll speak to them in language they will understand."

Again and again, our interviewees made the point that knowledge is worthless unless it can be communicated with clarity and relevance. The Go-To Professional adds most value when he can explain the ultra-complex in layman's language.

"When I deal with matters that are particularly intellectually challenging, and I'm about to give advice on them, I will often think - how can I explain this so that my 7 year old daughter will understand it? And I'll actually run it through my head like that. The net result is hopefully not patronising to my client, but crystal clear."

It's not only clients that appreciate plain speaking. Professionals who can communicate their expertise simply and effectively become valued sources of intelligence within their own firms.

"People are always ringing me up here, because they know I'll give them a straightforward answer that won't give them a headache. And because they know I communicate like that, they'll often invite me along to client meetings or refer me to their own clients because they know I won't come across as an anorak."

Once you are established in a practice area, show some flexibility

Even in the largest firms, flexibility is a valued approach. The smart operators realise this.

"Pretty early in my career, I tried to be flexible. I would go out and try to apply my skills in new areas. I didn't just do debt, I did equity as well. Most people specialised one way or the other. Then when mainstream M & A began to dry up, I went off and got involved in securitisation."

Notice this individual was not told to experiment in new areas, she did it of her own free will.

This had several benefits in career terms. It showed willing, it expanded her internal network and most important of all, it spread her risk.

"Clients don't ring me because of how much I know. Clients ring me because they know I'll speak to them in language they will understand."

“Of course in the top firms people specialise, that’s what clients expect, we’re not high street do-it-alls. But I have noticed that the people who prospered during the recession often popped up in unexpected places, doing deals that I wouldn’t necessarily have associated them with, and that’s because they had very smartly cultivated a second string to their bow just in case.”

Seek out media opportunities

Go-To Professionals are often unafraid of stepping into the limelight to demonstrate their expertise. Perhaps an element of showmanship is no bad thing, even for lawyers.

“People tend to be very wary of this, especially in law firms, but there is an insatiable demand for comment on just about every business issue. There are 3 or 4 TV channels dedicated to business coverage, and they are always on the look out for someone who can comment on technical issues or trends in a personable way. It hasn’t done me any harm. Colleagues can be a bit sniffy about it, but every TV appearance usually results in half a dozen calls the next day.

Even if they were wary of appearing on the mainstream media, most of our interviewees were happy to accept conference speaking engagements, and some actively sought out such opportunities.

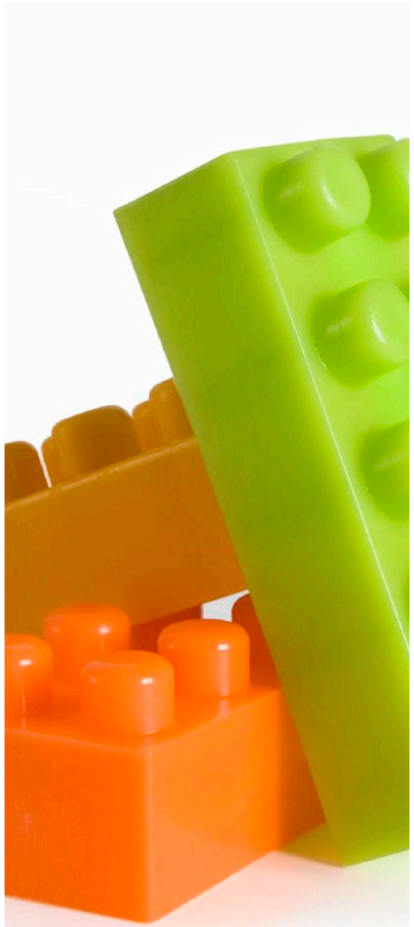
“Visibility is important. You become an established authority because you are quoted and speak at events – you may have no more expertise than a dozen others, it’s just you’ve made the decision to leverage your expertise and seek out a wider audience.”

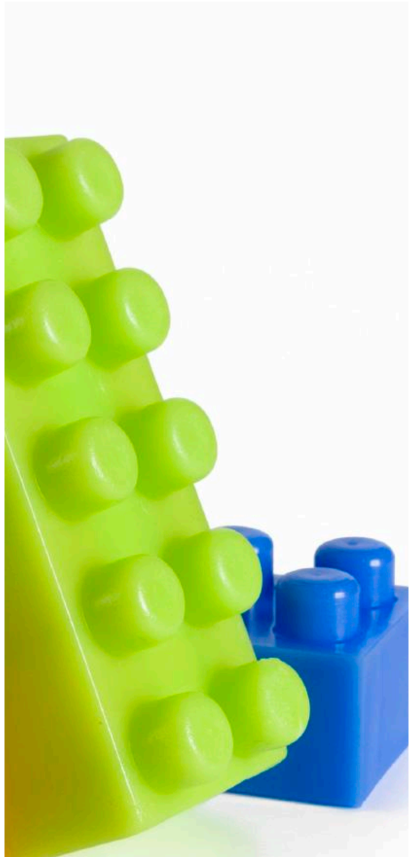
Go out on a limb occasionally - be entrepreneurial

Our Go-To Professionals were by and large a restless lot. Rather than perfecting a specific type of transaction and then being content to repeat it with great success for the remainder of their careers, they showed an inclination to innovate; and they didn’t just daydream, they implemented.

“I knew we hadn’t done much in Turkey and that it was a market that was growing steadily. So I suggested I dip a toe in the water there and give us a presence. And now, whilst it isn’t a major part of my role and certainly doesn’t generate vast revenue yet, I am known as the “go-to” person for that market, it has given me a lot of visibility in the firm and, over time, I think it will do well for us.”

It is often difficult, particularly in high-intensity areas of practice, to lift your head above the parapet, look around, and suggest something new, particularly when there is no guarantee of success. But precisely because an entrepreneurial approach is so unusual in professional services, an adviser who demonstrates it is likely to enjoy an enhanced profile.





Think beyond the task at hand - show strategic sense

One of our interviewees contrasted the approaches of two associates.

"If I ask them to review a document for me, one will come back with the mistakes highlighted and the odd question mark in the margin.

The other will present a hard copy and soft copy of the finished document with her amendments already incorporated, ready to fire across to the client.

The second might be a little presumptuous. But when I read it through I can make a couple of adjustments and then send it off. The first requires far more effort on my part. The second individual has a strategic sense, an understanding of how the advice we generate is used, and how to make my life easier. It's a completely different mindset. And I hope I show the second approach in all my dealings with clients. I don't just dump my advice on their desks – I show an awareness of how it can be used to make decisions, and what the various outcomes of the decisions could be. I'm trying to keep one step ahead all the time."

See the bigger picture

No matter how successful an individual or group practice may be, it always exists as part of the larger firm.

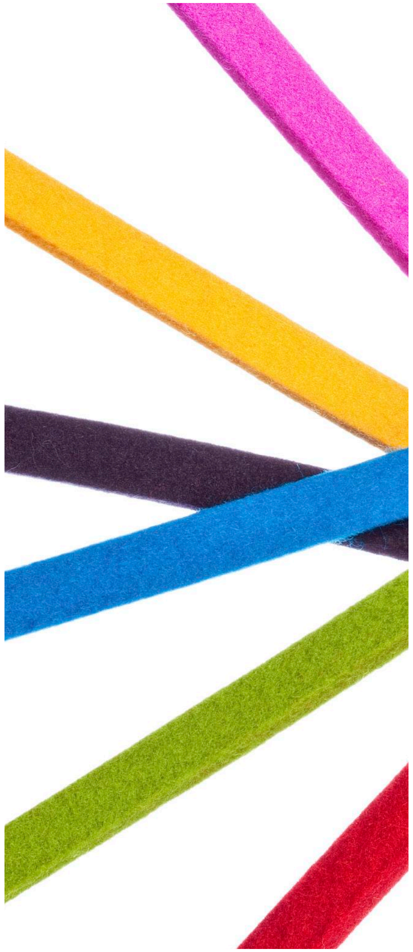
Our interviewees were very aware of the dangers of developing the "silo mentality" which afflicts many professional firms, and many take active steps to combat it.

"I can never understand why people find this so difficult. I try and make a point of introducing colleagues in other areas to my clients. I see it as a win/win rather than as any kind of threat or risk. If we are doing lots of different work for a client, we are achieving a greater share of their spend, and deepening and widening our knowledge of their business. But you can't do it unless you take the trouble to meet with people from different practice areas. I try and put that sort of thing in the diary once a week. And it's a reciprocal thing: I introduce a colleague to my client, he'll usually do the same for me, not necessarily straight away, but some time."

Food for thought...

- How well do you know your own strengths and weaknesses? Are you pursuing a practice area that dovetails well with your skillset?
- For what could you justifiably claim to be a "subject matter expert" – or for what do you hope to be able to make that claim in the future?
- If your principal workstream dried up overnight, how easily could you diversify?
- When did you last seek an opportunity either to innovate within your practice area, or to demonstrate flexibility?
- Would your clients credit you with being a "strategic thinker"?
- When did you last seek out a media opportunity or speaking engagement to showcase your area of expertise?
- When did you last introduce a colleague from a different practice area to one of your clients?

Relationships



A top professional in a large firm today is at the centre of an increasingly complex web of relationships, both internal and external. His ability to manage those relationships – and the metaphor was often relayed to us of the circus artiste keeping his plates spinning – will often determine his long term success.

Our interviewees shared numerous insights into the way they manage these different stakeholder relationships.

Understand your client's real agenda

"Without doubt, your most important client is your client's client. Get this right, understand who your client's client is, and the nature of your advice will be immeasurably better. Many advisers think that they are there to expound upon their area of expertise - employment law, doing business in Estonia, whatever - rather than understanding why that advice is required, and making everything they say relevant to that context."

The ability to understand a client's ecology - how each stakeholder impacts on the rest - is critical to building up a genuinely trusting, loyal relationship. The client's client could be internal - a new CEO for example - and the primary need for the advice could be all about demonstrating your client's competence to the newcomer. Or it could be external - the market, for instance, and the need to demonstrate a hardening line on cost control.

In both examples, the technical advice itself is only part of the story. Asking why the advice is needed, and who your client is hoping to influence with it, can radically improve the perceived commerciality of your input.

Read and respond to different personality styles

One of our interviewees told us the story of a heated meeting towards the end of a long and complex transaction.

On one side of the table, a shirtsleeved lawyer of Antipodean descent, slouching in the chair, loosening his tie, scenting a kill.

On the other, a product of one of England's finest public schools, sitting ramrod straight, starched collar immaculately in place.

The former felt he had the deal in the palm of his hand. He got up from his chair, placed his knuckles on the table and roared at the Englishman:

"We've got you by the b******s you f****r! Why don't you do us all a favour and settle, right now?"

In the silence that followed, one or two people noticed the Englishman's jaw begin to clench. A certain steeliness was apparent in his eyes. And for the next two hours he slowly, methodically, dismantled every aspect of his opponent's case.

“You need to be able to read whether your client likes straight-talking, or whether a bit more finesse is required. Getting the approach wrong can lead to antagonism.”

By the end, it was not him doing the settling, but the shell-shocked other side.

We explored the nature of Persona in professional life in an earlier chapter - concluding that the image you present the world is not fixed, but fluid.

The same is true of effective relationship building and face to face negotiation. The skill lies in quickly identifying different personality types and flexing your own style accordingly.

“You need to be able to read whether your client likes straight-talking, or whether a bit more finesse is required. Getting the approach wrong can lead to antagonism.”

Having a “one size fits all” or “what you see is what you get” mentality to building relationships effectively precludes you doing effective business with anyone whose personality does not match your own. The savvy professionals we interviewed for this book all appreciated the need to be a little more sophisticated in their dealings with other people.

Tell tale signs

The key to successful professional interactions lies in the ability to identify the other person’s personality style, and flex your own to achieve a connection. Our interviewees told us many stories of Partners who failed to do this – their approach was one of charge in and hope for the best. These professionals are not necessarily failures, but they take much longer to get the work done. Personality differences are a fact of life, just as cultural differences are, but they don’t have to impede the transaction of business providing you are alive to them. Here are some clues as to the personality styles of four different clients. How would you flex your style to connect efficiently with each?

"The key to successful professional interactions lies in the ability to identify the other person's personality style, and flex your own to achieve a connection."

Client A: Always on time or early. Firm handshake and steady, sometimes slightly intimidating, eye contact. No interest in or involvement with small talk – you know nothing about this person's private life. All communication channelled through PA – never responds to emails.

Client B: Invariably late for appointments. Prefers the telephone to email as principal means of communication. Often asks you to provide information you have already given. "Just can't seem to lay my hands on it…" Wide range of facial expressions – (to you) mild irritants can produce expressions of horror in this individual.

Client C: Quietly spoken and often does not contribute at all in larger meetings. Surprises you in one to one conversations by remembering apparently insignificant details, particularly personal ones, from previous encounters. Very difficult to get a quick response out of: "Let me take that away and think about it…"

Client D: Incredible retentive memory for minor technical matters, and will often correct you. Difficult, sometimes, to get focussed on strategic questions because preferred style is to "drill down" into the detail. Intermittent eye contact.

Service mindset matters as much as technical proficiency

"I'd say about 5% of building an effective client relationship is about the nature of the technical advice I give."

There was remarkable consensus among the professionals we interviewed that technical ability was often incidental to high-value client relationships. "Added value" in these relationships was best achieved by any of the following:

Accessibility - can they reach you when they need to reach you?
Commerciality - does your advice take account of their most pressing strategic, operational and political concerns?
Reliability - do you do what you said you were going to do by the time you agreed to do it?

And the "magic bullet" for an exceptional client relationship?

Overdelivery – exceed, pre-empt, anticipate, forewarn.

"If I can, I try and work out what would be of value to the client that exceeds the initial brief but doesn't necessarily incur cost for us. So it may be an introduction to someone internally or externally; it may be a conscious effort to comfortably beat a project deadline; it may be some know-how about handling this stage of the project, or the stage after that..."

Make more use of the phone

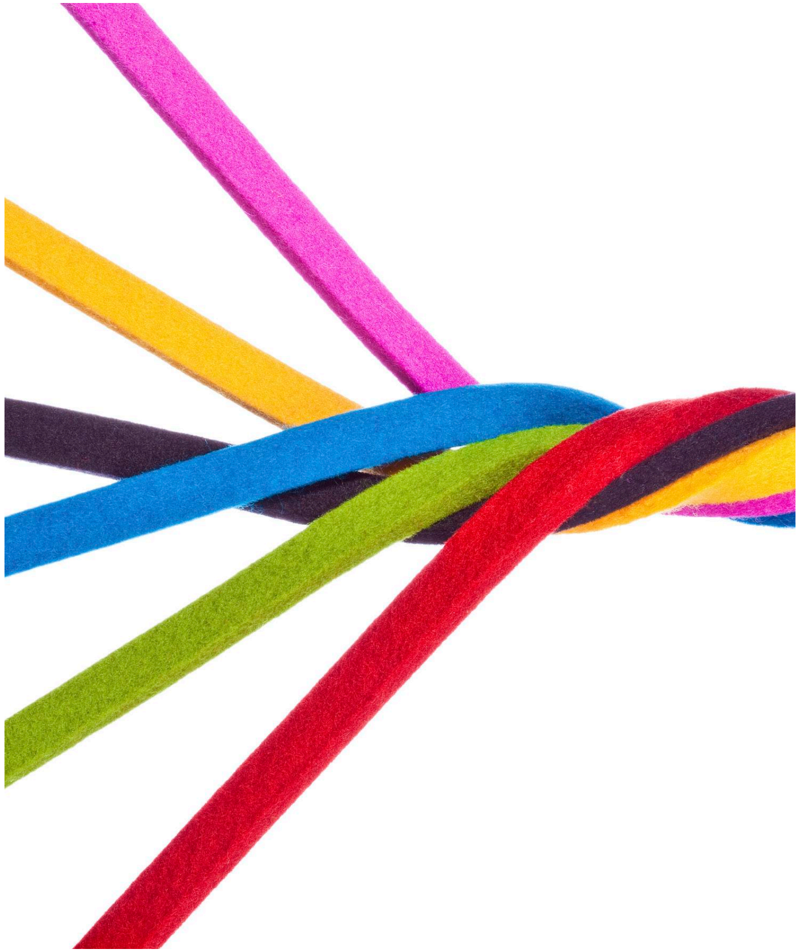
"Relationships are not built via email. Relationships are built in person and on the phone. I think a lot of professionals don't pick up the phone because they think they'll come across as double glazing salesmen. Pride is at the heart of it, but they are missing a trick."

Many professionals – often those not in the "go-to" category – are indeed deeply suspicious of the phone, and go to great lengths to avoid using it. Several interviewees, however, felt that the phone was indispensable as a means of reconnecting on a human level ("I was wondering how things were going in that new role...") and/or providing an insight you know will be of value to the client.

"I'll often call following results announcements, or when they or a competitor have been mentioned in the FT. Clients like to be noticed, and to feel that you as an advisor are in some respects a custodian of their public profile. If it's good, you want to celebrate with them. If it's bad, you want to commiserate but also come with some ideas of how to set things right again."

Like many other relationship-building tactics, this one works best if done systematically.

"I steel myself to make one call a day to a client I've not heard from in a while. That means in an average year, I'll have had 250 or so one-to-one client interactions that I would not otherwise have had."



The reason I called...

Here are some tactics our interviewees used to reconnect with clients on the phone:

1. **Share** - ideas or an opportunity they may be interested in
2. **Update** - on market trends
3. **Respond** - to news stories about the client organisation, good or bad
4. **Alert** - them to a development in the market or proprietary research findings
5. **Introduce** - e.g. introductions of useful contacts for them
6. **Invite** - offer a seminar or event on a particular topic they're interested in
7. **Offer** - help with something or offer the use of resources

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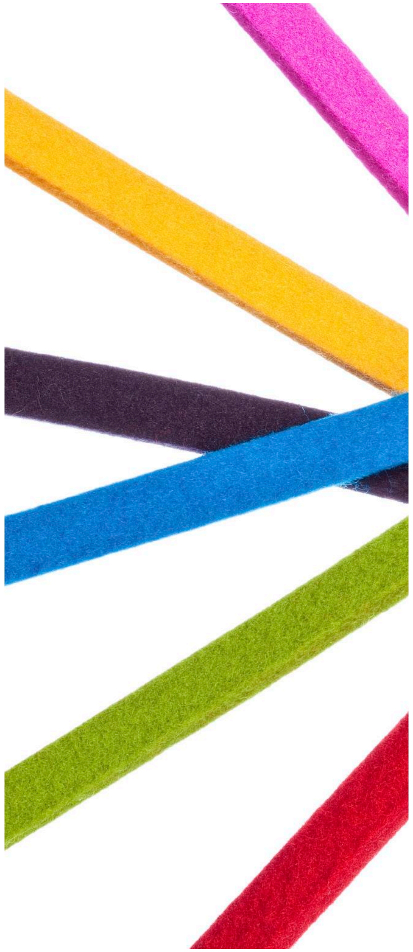

Delegate or die

Relationships with clients are not the only ones on the minds of the Go-To Professional. Our interviewees were keen to stress the importance of internal ties, and the nuances of managing relationships with Partners, peers and junior professionals.

"The days of the lone Rainmaker, out there in the jungle eating what he kills and functioning independently of the firm are pretty much over. It's a team effort, the client is buying a co-ordinated team, and unless the individual professional has the relationships in place to leverage the power of that team, he will under-perform."

Key to this team effort is the professional's relationship with his junior staff, and the extent to which he or she trusts them to get on with the "grunt work". Many professionals recognise that delegation is not one of their strengths.

"It's the streak of perfectionism, I suppose. The sense that no-one else quite understands the deal as I do, that mistakes are bound to creep in if I relinquish control."

Another commented:

"The one thing I wish I'd appreciated earlier is that as you mature in this industry it's all about origination, not execution., At some stage, you have to let go of the execution side and put your trust in your juniors."

The benefits of effective delegation were succinctly summarised by one of our interviewees:

"It should be a clear win-win. Your juniors feel motivated, and you are free to take a more strategic view of transactions and relationships."

Critical to effective delegation was not only the correct allocation of tasks, but a sense too of ongoing supervision and feedback. Star professionals note the good as well as the bad in the work of their teams.

"My whole training as a lawyer is to look for the inconsistencies, the mistakes. I have a hyper-critical mindset. So when I got some feedback from the team that it would be nice to be appreciated occasionally, at first it didn't compute. I'm not paid to look out for the good stuff, I'm paid to look for mistakes. So it meant employing a completely different way of looking at pieces of work - seeing the good, and acknowledging it, as well as the bad. I'm not alone in this. I don't think I ever got a word of praise from my supervising Partners when I was training. But I have noticed a distinct change in the way my team respond to me now I am a little more even-handed, so it's a skill that can and should be learned."

Find the right mentor

Understanding how the firm really works, and being able to navigate its organisational politics – “knowing who has real influence and who has the illusion of it” as one interviewee put it – confers a real operational advantage on a professional. The process of acquiring this knowledge is accelerated by the cultivation of a mentoring relationship with a seasoned pro. The majority of our interviewees were able to identify a relationship of this kind as making a contribution to their success, though responses differed as to the formality of this arrangement.

“Younger professionals, particularly in their late-20s when they’ve been around a while, can become a bit chippy towards experienced Partners. Not in any sense rude, just wanting to stand on their own two feet, to be acknowledged as authorities in their own right. Whereas I think the smarter approach is to be very open to drinking in the experience, the perspectives, of Partners.”

Few of our interviewees were involved in formal mentoring programmes, rather they sought out an informal relationship with a Partner they respected – and who was in a position to positively affect their career.

“It’s important to acquire a mentor who is not only willing to help you advance but is powerful enough to make the case for you and have people act on the recommendation. It’s a case of knowing where the power lies.”

Cultivate peer-level relationships

When, finally, the professional attains the goal of partnership, it might be supposed that most attention must then be focussed on cultivating external relationships.

Not a bit of it. Several of our interviewees commented that the first years of partnership are a time for particularly careful cultivation of peer level relationships in an environment that can seem surprisingly hostile.

“It’s a whole different ball game when you make Partner. It’s very like the transition from primary to secondary school. One minute you’re used to being the swaggering know-all who bows down to no-one. The next, you’re the smallest kid in the playground, and the bigger boys are all tripping you up and trying to steal your dinner money.”

Making a success of this transitional phase – gaining the respect of your eminent peers – seems to be a mix of sussing out the lie of the land, but not being afraid to make your voice heard.

“You will be tested when you first become a partner. It is important to respect the more experienced hands, but not be intimidated by them. Push back, sometimes. Make it clear you have a point of view which you are not afraid to air.”

Some food for thought...

- Who are your clients' clients?
- How skilled are you at "reading" different personality styles?
- When did you last make a conscious attempt to overdeliver?
- How often do you use a phone call to strengthen a client relationship?
- Would your direct reports regard you as a good delegator? Do you give credit where it is due?
- Who among the senior players you work with has both the inclination and the influence to assist your career?

"Making a success of this transitional phase – gaining the respect of your eminent peers – seems to be a mix of sussing out the lie of the land, but not being afraid to make your voice heard."

Steven Pearce

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The Results Consultancy helps professional services firms to win and retain high value clients. Much of our work involves the training and coaching of Partners and Senior Associates in client and contact relationship management, business development and networking skills.

We specialise in the legal, accounting, financial services, real estate and consulting sectors, and work extensively across the UK, Europe and Asia.

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