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Beltway Firms Champion Associate and New Partner Training

Arnold & Porter's APEX program was born out of our desire to invest in the firm's next generation of talent, said firm chair Richard Alexander.

BY BRUCE LOVE

What You Need to Know

- Beltway firms are touting their innovative training programs as a way to attract and retain talent, and shape the lawyers they need in a changing legal services market.
- Steptoe & Johnson just recently finished the first year of its new cycle of Academies for associates—a program aimed at addressing skills beyond a classic legal skills training program.
- In March, Arnold & Porter rolled out a new way of helping its new partners and counsel fully embrace their new roles and responsibilities.

In a hot talent market like Washington, D.C.—where finding and retaining the best associates is as much about offering attractive career prospects and interesting work, as it is pay scale and perks—smart Beltway firms are investing heavily in training programs that set their lawyers up for success.

In March, Arnold & Porter rolled out a new way of helping its new partners and counsel fully embrace their new roles and responsibilities. The Arnold & Porter Executive Leadership Academy (APEX) was first offered to partners and counsel elevated between 2019 and 2022—currently a cohort of 75 people that also includes new laterals from the government.

The two-year program will be offered to each annual cohort of new partners and counsel.

Andy Colón, Arnold & Porter's chief legal talent officer, believes the program is unique because it offers a “holistic, integrated and blended approach” to learning in support of a lawyer's transition to becoming a partner or counsel.

“What I often hear at industry conferences and roundtables is firms either ignore the training and development of their junior partnership and counsels, or their training is just a series of presentations on an ad hoc basis—and not good,” said Colón. “Ours is a training curriculum we built that highlights best practices on critical areas for success.”

The program modules “build on each other” over a two-year curriculum covering law firm economics, effective networking, time management, and “finding your voice.” It also covers diversity, equity and inclusion themes such as disrupting unconscious bias.

The course is delivered with a mix of guest speakers, industry consultants, and internal firm leaders.

Attention to Individual Needs

Participants are also provided with training based on individual needs, including a business development coaching program with individual coaching with an industry expert or consultant.

Participants can meet with a consultant to discuss the efforts they are making to generate business, and to address business development, issues or concerns. A group coaching component allows new partners and counsel to meet together and share issues in the hope that they can learn from each other and to build internal relationships.

As part of the program, Colón has implemented a “more structured way” for new partners and counsel to meet with practice chairs and firm leadership to discuss development and execution of their professional and business development strategies.

“Again, this is to ensure that there is a conversation about how they are doing, what is working, what is not working, and to get the guidance and support they need to elevate their efforts,” he said, adding that participants also have access to “confidential” advisors who provide guidance on how best to navigate “personal and professional” challenges as well as “networking opportunities” to foster collaboration among colleagues.

Arnold & Porter chair Richard Alexander, said the first few years when someone enters into the partnership are “really critical,” and the APEX program was born out of our desire to invest in the firm’s next generation of talent.

“When we are promoting people into our counsel and partnership ranks, we are promoting them for long-term success. But it’s a big change from being an associate to moving into these new responsibilities,” said Alexander, adding that while his new partners are always “great lawyers” by the time they have been promoted, new responsibilities, including mentoring, training, and collaboration are needed. “We view this program as something that will help them build on that success. They’re making an investment in us, and we’re making an investment in them.”

Alexander noted that the current cohort of new partners in the APEX program are diverse generationally, by ethnicity and gender, and by practice.

Deborah Knupp, managing director of corporate education provider, GrowthPlay, said the “genius” in the design of APEX program is how the firm “actively” promotes and “amplifies” the “parallel priorities of executive, professional development, and skill-building with the purposeful intention to cultivate a high-quality sense of authentic relationship building, community, connection and belonging among participants.”

Business development expert David H. Freeman, CEO David Freeman Consulting Group, called Arnold & Porter “prescient” for developing the program.

“The counsel and new partner phase are critical transition periods,” said Freeman. “Arnold & Porter is prescient in their understanding that intelligent investments made here can pay off powerfully for these lawyers and for the firm overall.”

Skills to Succeed

Steptoe & Johnson just recently finished the first year of its new cycle of Academies for associates—a program aimed at addressing skills beyond the firm’s classic legal skills training program. The firm’s Academies were the brainchild of Chair Gwen Renigar, Will Drake, a

partner in the firm's white collar practice and Steptoe's partner in charge of the firm's associate professional development, and the firm's Legal Talent Department.

"We've always had a really robust training program in classic legal skills like litigation skills, how to do a deposition, how to create privilege, how to improve your brief writing, for instance. Those hard skills are really important and they form the foundation of any legal education curriculum in the professional setting. But the everything else is where we distinguish ourselves," said Drake.

The associate academies, segmented by seniority—junior, mid-level, senior associate, counsel and new partner—are focused on areas like law firm economics and business development. Juniors learn how to receive assignments, while seniors learn how to delegate assignments and effective legal editing.

"I was never taught legal editing, but it's an incredibly important skill," said Drake. "You can't just markup a document in red pen or track changes, send it back, and then just expect a junior associate to divine your edits without explanation. Legal editing is much more about high-level editing, and giving direction."

Drake is quick to point out that these are not "soft skills" for a private practice lawyer.

"Soft skills sound like they are in excess and unneeded. These are important factors that people need to learn. We have a 360-degree approach to our training and professional development."

As an example, Drake points to the Academy courses on business skills, helping people create their own individual brands, and how to make a business case.

"To be a successful partner it's not enough to just be an excellent attorney, you have to be economically accretive and business-minded," said Drake, adding that Steptoe's Academy training helps associates maintain relationships with clients, develop new clients, maintain their network, and be a thought leader, to name a few. "It's important for the firm to provide training on those skills—which are really separate from core lawyering skills."

Steptoe's training also offers help and advise on personal issues, such as financial wellness, including sessions on retirement goals, budgeting, and investing.

"It's really just as a service by the firm to say, you're doing great work, you're working hard, you're making a great salary, but you don't always have time to think about these things. Here's the service that we can provide you," said Drake.

After a year of the Academies, all of the Am Law 100 firm's 148 associates have been part of the program, said Drake, adding that for him it has been "really exciting" to watch the program come into fruition and see the feedback.

"We are looking to create a mindset within our junior associates in which they don't view themselves as employees of attorneys who have clients, but instead as themselves attorneys who have clients, as members of a team," said Drake. "Everyone from law school shows up with the ability to problem-spot. Law school teaches you to take a fact pattern and look at all the problems. We're training people to be solution spotters. People who are willing to say, hey, we have a problem, and I think this is a solution. To really give them that ability, you have to give them the tools."