



# Thought | leader



By Robin Linnecar, Praesta Partners

IN-HOUSE COUNSEL are often keen to engage experienced lawyers from professional firms to tackle specific problems. Professional firms are keen to second lawyers to client companies for exposure to commercial clients and for other client-development reasons. However, there are built-in tensions to the arrangements. In-house wants help but also continuity: the firm wants a training ground. The in-house wants cost effectiveness (i.e. cheap expertise). The firm wants to develop the client business opportunity/relations but minimise the opportunity cost. How do both parties gain maximum benefit?

A publishing company's counsel had problems in 25 countries in the group. Managing the here and now libel actions necessitated a secondment of a six-year qualified from a firm. Experienced in law firms only, she proved an initial frustration. Moving from legal analysis to understanding the historical context, learning how to talk with industry people and seeking to form relationships took longer than necessary for her to be fully effective. Then, once relationships were established, continuity was essential. For the firm to end the secondment after six months was problematic for both parties.

A media company had worked through to what it thought was an organised contract but not what it really wanted. An experienced lawyer was brought in late, against this background of adversity, to apply a high degree of technical knowledge but with limited success possible in the circumstances.

A transportation company with limited in-house resource needed to look at technical and corporate agreements. For contract matters to be resolved by the seconded lawyer, however, there had to be greater sharing of information within the industry. Without that, progress proved limited.

Coaching is a way of enabling all parties to prepare effectively for these secondments and manage them successfully. Here are just a few examples of key areas to consider:

- Organising the brief so that there are clear objectives;
- Defining priorities and developing them effectively;
- Ensuring a steep and efficient learning curve in both parties;
- Working on how to make an impact speedily and lessening the time taken to build up expertise;
- Engaging and building relationships quickly;
- Managing the differing expectations of manager/partner/'new' peers/others;
- Enabling adjustments to arrangements and processes to be made rapidly by putting in place feedback mechanisms.

All this demands a process of widening experience and gaining understanding as quickly as possible. Moving through this process at speed will mean that cost effectiveness for the client is also a sensible commercial investment for the firm.

Above all, achieving the secondment you meant to have demands the ability of all parties to address the twin essentials of the secondment that make it successful:

- Maximising the lawyer's technical experience and expertise in doing a good legal job;
- Quickly and efficiently learning how to work in a different cultural and business setting and with different people.

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**ANDREW HEDLEY**, of Hedley Consulting, helps the leaders of professional-service organisations to create actionable strategies, develop their brands, enhance client relationships and manage change. His aim is to ensure vision, strategy, operations and communications are closely aligned.



**MICHAEL SHAW** became managing partner of Cobbetts in 1996 and is currently in his third term. Under Michael's leadership, Cobbetts has successfully undertaken two mergers, and now enjoys a national reputation and a place in the top 75 UK firms.



**NICOLA DAVIES** was appointed deputy managing partner of Mourant in 2002 and became chief executive of the newly-created Mourant Limited in the following year. She has overseen expansion into New York, San Francisco and Dubai, the sale of part of the business to HBOS plc, and the transition from partnership to corporate structure.