

The Re-Envisioned Lawyer

We must reshape our profession to serve Americans in a new era

By John Kuppens

America's legal industry is at a crossroads. The profound technological, economic and demographic changes of recent years are calling for a new approach to how we cultivate and inspire the next generation of lawyers.

On the technology side, emerging online legal services platforms such as *LegalZoom* and *Modria* augur the coming of a time when well-trained, experienced lawyers may be called on far less often to resolve minor disputes or handle routine matters.

Meanwhile, economic aftershocks from 2008's financial crisis have reduced the positions law firms can offer to new associates, and the nation's woefully underfunded, backlogged courts offer dwindling opportunities for these lawyers to learn to try cases.

Add to these factors the changing attitudes and priorities of the new generation of lawyers themselves: Millennials are a discerning group, selective about how they spend their time and to whom they pledge their loyalty. In particular, they are skeptical of working for years for the prospect of partnership, and want more engagement, support and responsibility than many firms have served up in the past.

How can the legal industry effectively adapt to these new realities? More important, what must we as lawyers become to remain a vibrant agent of justice in the years ahead?

I often consider these important questions, both in my new role as President of DRI – the leading organization of civil defense attorneys and in-house counsel – and as a partner in a major U.S. law firm. I'm convinced that we must respond to these questions holistically and resolutely – in effect, we must re-envision the role that a practicing lawyer will play in this new era.

No one can predict the future, but we can make certain assumptions about future lawyers based on the macro changes I just noted. In essence, the re-envisioned lawyer is likely to be:

- *Innovative and Collaborative* – generating creative solutions to complex legal and business problems, working in concert with teams across regions and cultures

- *Highly Focused and Highly Effective* – devoting energies toward high-value/high-stakes matters, and winning cases through extraordinary persuasive skills
- *Tech-savvy and Ever-connected* – using technology as a platform for working with greater speed and efficiency, and leveraging a virtual universe of contacts and resources through social networks
- *Values-driven and Committed* – changing the world through their approach to work and life, and their devotion to pro bono and community involvement

This positive, exciting vision of the future lawyer – as inexact as it might turn out to be – can serve as a rallying point for all of the leaders who are cultivating young talent in our profession. At DRI, we are leading the charge in professional development for this new era by retooling our programs and platforms. For example, acknowledging that face-to-face networking is less common among Millennial lawyers, we are about to roll out “DRI Circles,” a networking app through which DRI members can connect, send messages, arrange meetings and easily refer business. We also are complementing our gold-standard training seminars and printed materials with a new series of on-demand and online CLE offerings.

I know that law firms across the nation are pursuing similar strategies as they strive to attract and engage the lawyers who will lead them into the future. Among those strategies is one that is perhaps the most important of all: to listen to young lawyers, so we can understand their goals and needs and work with them to re-envision and re-create our profession for the exciting times ahead.

About the Author



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