

Leading the legal way: culture, trust and influence

In the latest in our occasional series [Iain Blatherwick](#), former Managing Partner of Browne Jacobson and now a management coach, reflects on the importance of culture to law firms' survival over the past 'Covid months' and the importance of building on strong foundations.

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Much is written about the importance of culture within professional service firms and plenty of those firms write at length and in glowing terms about their culture. Cultures have been seriously tested over the last 18 months, as firms have relied on the loyalty, goodwill, and resilience of their people and the strength of team relationships at a time of more remote and sometimes less visible management and leadership.

Firms have had to place huge amounts of trust in their people, and to a very large extent they have been handsomely rewarded for that trust. A professional services firm cannot operate on trust alone – there is still a need for support, supervision, development and standards to be met – but people like to be part of a business which trusts them, and those benefits should not be lost lightly. It would be very damaging to move from those new levels of trust, admittedly achieved through necessity, back to a position of unnecessary controls and interventions.

The debate around the return to offices is fascinating in this context and as firms grapple with the best approach, it is interesting to ask where the pressure to return comes from. You hope that those people who had the view that you cannot be productively working unless in the office have now been silenced, although recent communications from some firms might suggest not. Clearly there are good reasons to encourage a level of office working – we have already mentioned team spirit and consider new recruits who need to become a part of an organisation and will benefit from close working and the support of people around them. Whichever approach a firm takes, it should be honest about why it has taken that decision, ensuring it doesn't stem from a lack of trust in its people to deliver the service their clients expect.

A broader aspect of culture derives from the desire to help, whether that is colleagues, clients or the communities in which a business operates. Looking to build on the fact that the vast majority of businesses had successfully and responsibly navigated the challenges of the pandemic, the CBI recently urged us all to 'Seize the Moment' and to contribute to ensuring the UK delivers to its full potential. I commented at the time that it feels like we all need to build on this increased trust and create momentum by proving that businesses are genuinely interested in making a broader contribution to society. The majority of people in professional services are in a very privileged position and there is an ever-increasing expectation, not least from our own people, that we should use that position to influence, support and improve the communities around us. As the battle to attract and retain talent intensifies, those businesses who trust their people and who look to play a broader role in their communities will give themselves a competitive advantage.

Iain Blatherwick now runs Space + Time, an executive coaching programme aimed at c-suite level business leaders which offers support in horizon scanning and key decision making.

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