

# Interview with Steve Armstrong



STEVE ARMSTRONG, A LEADER IN THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FIELD, RECENTLY STEPPED DOWN AS DIRECTOR OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT AT WILMERHALE TO FORM THE CONSULTING FIRM ARMSTRONG TALENT DEVELOPMENT. THE KERMAPARTNERS QUARTERLY (KPQ) TALKS TO STEVE ARMSTRONG ABOUT HIS EXPERIENCES, THOUGHT LEADERSHIP AND VIEWS ON TALENT DEVELOPMENT IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICES FIRMS.

**KPQ:** After a career as a journalist and English professor, you began in 1985 at Shearman & Sterling primarily as a writing coach, with some training responsibilities on the side. To say the least, you acquired a lot more responsibilities both there and in your later positions at Paul Weiss and WilmerHale. What are the two-three most significant changes that leading law firms have made in talent development over that period?

**SA:** The changes have been pretty dramatic. When I walked into this world in 1985, only one other US firm had a full-time professional development director. Now, scores — probably hundreds — have that position. More substantively, in 1985 “professional development” meant formal training programs, almost all of which were aimed at new

lawyers. Now, it means much more — mentoring, competency models, assigning systems, coaching and counseling, career plans, new approaches to on-the-job learning, and the like. And many firms are investing as much in their senior lawyers, including partners, as in their junior associates. So firms are thinking much more broadly and seriously about everything they should be doing to get the most from their talent.

Behind those changes, I like to think (being an optimist by nature), lies a change in mindset. Most law firms used to assume that “talent” is 95 percent nature, not nurture. So firms tried to hire the most talented people, then stood back to see how they turned out. Most law-firm partners still operate under that assumption, but more law-firm leaders are realizing its cost. Even after people leave law

school, nurture rather than nature — whom they work with, the responsibility they’re given, the kind of feedback they receive, and so forth — plays a large part in their success. That, at least, is a much more useful operating assumption, because it leads a firm to try its best to push its lawyers to realize their full potential — and thus their full benefit to the firm — after they arrive.

This mindset doesn’t mean that a firm should shirk a rigorous weeding-out process. Many firms get their talent management wrong in two opposite directions simultaneously. They’re too slow to weed people out, often because they don’t have a systematic process for doing that (and, as a result, they sometimes act too harshly once they finally ask someone to leave — forgetting that he or she may be useful as a client or ally a

couple of decades later). But they're also too unfocused and haphazard about building the talents of those still in the firm. That balance between support and rigor isn't easy to strike, but it's really important.

**KPQ: What firms in the US and Canada do you regard as leaders in the talent development field? What are a few things that distinguish them?**

**SA:** This question may be out of date. These days, it's very difficult to pinpoint a couple of firms, because so many — including smaller ones, not just the behemoths — are trying out so many innovative approaches. Certainly, some mega-firms, such as Clifford Chance, have an established history of investing heavily and very effectively in a panoply of approaches to development. WilmerHale has as effective an array of programs as any firm in the country, I think.

But there are new ideas popping up everywhere, and, in fact, some smaller firms find it easier to innovate than the larger ones. For example, one or two smaller firms are no longer billing clients for first-year associates, and some others have substantially reduced their billable-hour requirements for first-years. I suspect no major international firm will quickly

follow that lead (although, of course, many countries have "trainee" programs with similar goals). There's a very exciting ferment of ideas, many of which arise from a sense that the old law-firm model — hire a lot, put them all in a lockstep system, watch most of them leave, and sift out a few partners at the end — doesn't work so well any more.

**KPQ: You have said that at WilmerHale, you tried to spend about 50 percent of your time on strategic initiatives and the other half on managing the PD and career functions in the firm. Other chief talent officers will want to know how you did this. And what would you advise Executive Committees about the best use of their chief talent officer?**

**SA:** That's a tough question because the answer depends so much on the maturity of the firm's talent programs, on its size, and on how much it cares to invest in this area. At WilmerHale, I had two huge advantages: the firm was willing to invest a lot, and I worked with very senior and experienced people in my group who were perfectly capable of running training and mentoring programs, and whom any firm would be lucky to have as the person in charge of talent management. And my role had been defined by the firm as just as much strategic as operational.

That didn't mean I could just sit around thinking (a task for which I'm ill-suited), but it did mean I could focus on new projects — such as leadership development for partners — that could have a significant impact on the firm. For those running a firm, my advice would be to make sure your chief talent officer has enough staff so that he or she can do what you want them to. For those running talent or professional development departments, my advice would be a little different: make sure the design and execution of everything, no matter how mundane, is impeccable — and, if that leaves you no time for anything else, push hard for more staff.

**KPQ: You were one of the first senior law firm administrators to make career development a centerpiece of your work, and indeed, your title. In a time of recession, layoffs and salary freezes, do you think that associates will become disenchanted with career development guidelines and support in law firms?**

**SA:** On the contrary, I think the right kind of career-development program is just as necessary, and just as welcomed, in tough times as in flush times. By "right kind," I mean something like this: very few associates join a firm thinking that their career goals will mesh perfectly with the firm's goals.



### STEPHEN ARMSTRONG

*Prior to setting up the consulting firm Armstrong Talent Development, Stephen Armstrong was Director of Career Development at WilmerHale LLP. There, he had overall responsibility for the firm's professional development, mentoring and career-counseling programs. Before joining WilmerHale in 2001, he was the director of professional development at Paul, Weiss and at Shearman & Sterling, both based*

*in New York City. Armstrong has served as co-chair of the ABA Committee on Business Law Education and as chair of the Professional Development Consortium. He has both published articles on continuing education for lawyers and on knowledge management, and was co-author of "Thinking Like a Writer: A Lawyer's Guide to Effective Writing and Editing" (2nd edition, PLI, 2003; with Timothy P. Terrell).*

For most, in fact, their time in the firm will be a small fraction of their careers as a whole. For a career-development program to work, it has to be frank about the firm's needs and expectations. But it also has to take an associate's own goals seriously, even if they point outside rather than inside the firm and even if they don't mesh over the long run with the firm's goals. The core of a career-development program isn't competencies or training or annual plans: it's the willingness to have frank, ongoing, commonsensical, adult conversations about someone's next steps from both the firm's perspective and their own. If your programs —

evaluations, mentoring, career-counseling — encourage those discussions, then you're much more likely to have people firing on all cylinders while they're in the firm and becoming loyal alumni if they leave.

**KPQ: Diversity and gender parity in associate hiring is a fact in most firms today. What should firms be doing to bridge the relative absence of women and minorities in the partner ranks?**

**SA:** This is such a complex question that my only hope is to over-simplify radically.

First, as to gender parity, I'd separate out what are known as the "work-life issues" — for example, in other words, will my

kids love their nanny more than me? Those issues affect men as well as women, and firms have to create flexible work arrangements and career tracks that enable ambitious, talented, hard-working lawyers to do justice to both their careers and their families. If a firm doesn't do that, it drastically limits the talent pool it can draw from.

Second, as to all forms of parity, the issues have to be out in the open. They have to be talked about often and frankly by the firm's leaders, at partner retreats and in other forums, and the parity has to be championed explicitly and strongly by the firm's power-brokers, not just the formal

leadership. As part of that discussion, everyone has to be led to grasp the pernicious effects of implicit bias on even the best-intentioned, least consciously biased lawyers. The evidence of these effects is overwhelming.

Third, and most important, a firm needs to focus, person by person, on the specifics of an individual's career: What kind of work have they been doing? How much responsibility have they been given? In terms of whom they work with and the specializations they develop, what choices will carve out the most promising path to partnership? This should be happening for everyone, of course. But it really needs to happen for those who, on average, are at greater risk than white men of stalled careers and of feeling out of place and therefore disengaging. Nothing will matter more than this kind of individualized attention. Among other and greater benefits, it can result in someone who is about to leave deciding to stay instead, because they realize how highly they're regarded and how much support they have.

**KPQ:** When you began at WilmerHale, it was Wilmer Cutler & Pickering. Around two years later you learned that the firm was merging with Hale & Dorr to create a firm

**of about 1,000 lawyers. In the merger of these cultures, what did you learn about some key things that merger partners have to focus on?**

**SA:** The merger was that rare animal, a true merger of equals. As a result, what mattered most was that the businesses fit together well, that the two firm's economics were roughly equivalent, and that the combined firm focused strongly and clearly on its business strategy going forward — which meant, as the strategy experts tell us, making tough decisions about what it would not do as well as investing in the right directions.

But the merger worked not only because it got that right. If I had to point to three things that helped most to mesh the firms, one would be the amount of time spent discussing the merger with partners in advance, introducing them to each other during the merger, and continuing to bring them together in large and small groups over the early years. The firm invested a lot in that effort, in both time and money. The second would be the importance of leadership: it made a great difference that the co-heads of the firm, drawn from both legacy firms, got along so well, and struck the right balance between making tough strategic calls and paying lots of attention to the people. Partners argued with their calls, of course, but

they set a tone that made all the difference. And the third would be managing the pace of change, so that the firm was clearly moving forward but without constant upheaval and anxiety. One aspect of that management was communicating about impending changes. For example, before the firm changed its career paths and mentoring program, as it's just done, we spent a lot of time talking to lawyers in all the offices before we made any decisions.

If we had it all to do over again, I think we could have focused more quickly on two things. One is the difference that scale makes: you can't just take the same systems and double their size; you have to change the systems and, in some places, re-design the infrastructure altogether. The second is the difference between values and culture, and the ease with which people with shared values but different cultures can, with the best of intentions, misunderstand each other. The firms merged in part because their expressed values were very similar, and that continues to be part of the glue that holds them together. But Wilmer (primarily a DC-based firm) and Hale and Dorr (primarily Boston-based) had quite different cultures: people communicated differently, they reached decisions differently, they reacted differently to the

same forms of behavior, they described different traits when you asked them what they valued most in their associates. The firm is stronger as a whole because it can now draw on both cultures. But I think — and there may not be consensus about this — we could have surfaced the differences and talked them through more explicitly as soon as they began to emerge.

**KPQ: Over the years, you have said some pretty strong things about law firms and lawyers at public conferences. Phrases like “irrational profits” and “grossly inefficient” come to mind. First, how did you get away with this and remain employed? Second, what are your current main critiques of the way most firms operate?**

**SA:** First, unless you have the tape, I never said those things. If I had, and stripping away the rhetoric designed to get an audience’s attention, I would have been making a point that isn’t at all revolutionary these days.

You’ve no doubt heard the old business-school story about the Black & Decker executives who were asked to name the major product that their clients bought. They answered “drills”. The right answer, of course, was “holes” — the drills, for the clients, were just the means to an end. Law firms are still largely — though less and less — based on the design created by

Cravath long ago. That design has a couple of elements that no longer make much sense, in the eyes of many clients and many firms.

First, profits are still based largely on billable hours. But clients don’t buy hours; they buy results that increase or protect the value of their businesses. The “profits” are irrational in the sense that they’re linked to hours, not to the value added for clients (the problem, of course, is how to quantify that value so you can charge for it, without too much risk of over- or under-charging). Moreover, the focus on billable hours certainly doesn’t incentive lawyers to work efficiently — hence one aspect of the “inefficiency” (I retract “gross” if I ever said it). Second, although more and more firms are modifying the “Cravath” model for organizing their lawyers, it still forms the framework through which most firms think about compensation, job descriptions, career tracks, and the like. Lockstep advancement and compensation, the division of lawyers primarily into partners and associates, the assumption that all associates have essentially the same job description — all those assumptions make it increasingly difficult for law firms to deploy and use their lawyers efficiently.

**KPQ: I understand that you and your wife are settling in San Diego. Besides working on your sailing skills, what are your plans in the training and consulting field?**

**SA:** To be clear, it’s San Diego not just because I’m a sun-loving sybarite, but because my wife has professional reasons to be there. Really.

I’m looking forward to working with law firms and other professional service firms in a couple of areas. First, consulting on the whole range of talent-management issues, programs and policies — especially with firms that have business reasons for thinking broadly and innovatively about how to get the most from their talent. Second, teaching programs in managerial and leadership skills, something I’ve been doing at WilmerHale. And, finally, to return to your first question, teaching legal writing programs — a sideline I’ve continued over the years, mostly for federal judges, government agencies and CLE organizations such as NITA and ALI-ABA so far, but now for law firms as well.

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*This interview was conducted by David Cruickshank.*