

Looking for career take-off?
Visit our 'Turning Points' career hub >



Where am I? > [Home](#) > [Analysis](#) > [In-House Lawyers](#)

At your service – what makes the best client partners stand out from the crowd?



Author: Dominic Carman | 15 May 2015 | 00:00 |

[Send](#) [Print](#) [Share](#) [Comment](#)

Relationships. The steel framework around which every successful law firm is built. But what really cements the bond between a firm and its clients are the client partners. They are the galvanizers who deliver or – to borrow a cliché – under promise and over deliver on behalf of their clients. So what is it that makes the perfect client partner and separates them from their rank and file peers?

Legal Week Intelligence's Client Satisfaction Report (CSR) 2014 – published earlier this year and based on the responses of more than 1,400 in-house counsel – offers some explanation of what is important to those buying legal services. Cost, quality and value are critical when assessing both partners and their firms, according to the CSR, but what makes these pedigree partners stand out is more than these factors alone.

A new addition to the CSR this year, which offers more insight, is the Legal Week Client Partner of the Year award. In-house lawyers cast votes for dozens of partners who they believe have an edge on their rivals. Eight partners were shortlisted, with two winners selected – one to represent global firms: Jonathan Herbst of Norton Rose Fulbright (pictured, second below); and the other UK firms: David Jackson of Shoosmiths (pictured, below).

Here, some of the in-house lawyers voting in the survey discuss what sets those shortlisted for Client Partner of the Year apart.

Going the extra mile

According to Justin van Wijngaarden, general counsel at GH Financials, what makes financial services and regulation partner Herbst stand out is clear: his technical expertise cannot be faulted. "Jonathan is able to jump across different areas of profound technical challenge with ease – UK verses US regulations in financial services through to corporate governance," explains Wijngaarden. "He can put on different hats within nanoseconds.

"Everything we've thrown at him has been caught well and thrown back well. He's very grounded, not stuffy – no arrogance, no off-hand approach – very accommodating, a good listener and he's able to engage in such a way that you feel like you're talking to a trusted partner."

For Jackson, leader of Shoosmiths' technology, media and commercial practice, different skills are emphasised, as OneSavings Bank GC Zoe Bucknell outlines: "What sets David apart is that he takes the time to understand our priorities and applies the law to that rather than spouting a preconceived idea of what the letter of the law says. That's why I always rate David so highly – I know I'll get advice tailored to me and to the situation my company finds itself in.

"He spends the time to understand our business: the culture, the nuances, the things that are

[Welcome](#) [My account](#) [Email alerts](#)

Welcome Dominic

[Logout](#)

Advertisement



شركة للمحاماة
Sharq Law Firm

Al Noor Building, Ground Floor, C Ring Road,
P.O. Box 6997, Doha, Qatar
Tel: +9744442220, Email: info@sharqlawfirm.com
www.sharqlawfirm.com

[Job of the Week](#) [Featured Recruiters](#) [Jobs](#)

London
Major Offshore Firm
Seeking Top Tier
City Associate



Lipson Lloyd-Jones
Legal Recruiters

[Search](#)

LATEST JOBS

[eNL Midlands & South West: Residential Property Case Handler - Gloucestershire](#)

Negotiable: eNL Midlands & South West: Residential Property Case Handler, Gloucestershire...

[Hughes-Castell \(Hong Kong\) Ltd: Regional Compliance Officer \(8+ yrs PQE\) Shanghai...](#)

Competitive compensation package on offer: Hughes-Castell (Hong Kong) Ltd:...

[JLegal: Dispute Resolution/Litigation Paralegal, International Law Firm](#)

Negotiable: JLegal: Dispute Resolution/Litigation Paralegal, International...

[eNL Midlands & South West: Commercial Lawyer](#)

Negotiable: eNL Midlands & South West: In-House Commercial Lawyer - A rare...

[More legal jobs](#)

actually important to us on any specific negotiation."

Shortlisted Nabarro intellectual property partner Louise Gellman, meanwhile, combines pragmatism with empathy. "Louise is a very practical lawyer," says Kathy Atkinson, legal director at Kettle Foods. "I don't have to be concerned that she will blind me with intricacies of the law, she gets straight to the point of what it means for the business. I've dealt with trademark counsel over the years; they're much of a muchness. They all know the law, but Louise makes me feel like she is a partner to our business, not just an external adviser."

"She understands the pressures of an in-house lawyer and will therefore frame her advice accordingly. She's genuine, very bothered – she actually cares about our business. When things go badly, she feels my pain."



Another of the shortlisted eight is Rebecca Williams, who became an asset finance partner at Addleshaw Goddard three years ago. Efficiency and effective time management are her trademarks. "Rebecca is spot on," says Alessia Frisina, GC at De Lage Landen Leasing. "What I really like about her is she doesn't waste my time – when you are in-house you have no time – she gets straight to the point. She knows the asset finance industry so well. I've never felt that, whatever she was charging me, there was an extra minute that hadn't given me that added value."

Under ever-increasing cost control pressure, legal spend remains clients' chief concern, although the received wisdom that a high price usually indicates good quality still applies. But while clients understand that a Rolls-Royce service will never come with a Ford price tag, they may still expect a few valuable extras to be thrown in by law firms to make the sale.

The bottom line is simple: what clients seek most is good value. To provide it, quality legal advice must be accompanied by first-rate service delivery. These are the twin engines that drive a good firm-client relationship in delivering overall satisfaction and in maintaining it.

Talk to GCs about the lawyers they consistently rate most highly, and these themes are universally echoed. It is another well-worn cliché perhaps, but they also go the extra mile. As one client says of Allen & Overy corporate partner Ian Stanley: "Ian has a real presence in any meeting: he looks the part, acts the part and within five minutes can capture all of the points and explain them in a way that is palatable – that's really the key. He cuts to the chase and drives things forward."

The same applies to Katherine Coates at Clifford Chance (CC), where she is head of both the firm's financial institutions group in London and its global insurance sector group. According to Jennifer Parets, GC at Swiss Re: "Katherine is very measured in temperament. In times of great stress or crisis you need someone who has that measured personality. She's very thoughtful, but not just on a personal level, she's thoughtful of Swiss Re: the relationship she has with us as the client."

"Katherine also rolls up her sleeves: it doesn't matter whether it's strategic or more detail-oriented, she is capable and willing to throw herself and her attention as and when it is needed for the ultimate benefit of Swiss Re. I have not really seen that level of commitment elsewhere – it's unparalleled in terms of quality of service."

A partner in Ashurst's energy, transport and infrastructure team, Logan Mair advises on large-scale infrastructure and outsourcing projects. One of Mair's key clients says: "Where he stands apart from other lawyers is that he's able to find a fresh way of looking at particular issues and develop ideas as to how we might tackle them. He's also very good at selling solutions, particularly to the other side, and at understanding what everyone's worried about."

LegalWeek

Banking Litigation & Regulation Forum

BOOK YOUR
PLACE NOW

Wednesday 10 June 2015

Le Méridien Piccadilly
London W1
United Kingdom



RECRUITERS

LEGAL EVENTS

[The Legal Innovation Awards](#)

Start Date: 22 May 2015

[Legal Week Banking Litigation and Regulation Forum 2015](#)

Start Date: 10 Jun 2015

Venue: Le Méridien Piccadilly, London W1, UK

[Legal Week Corporate Counsel Forum Hong Kong 2015](#)

Start Date: 18 Jun 2015

Venue: Renaissance Harbour View Hotel, Hong Kong

[Legal Week Strategic Technology Forum 2015](#)

Start Date: 24 Jun 2015

Venue: Ritz-Carlton Penha Longa, Portugal

[More legal events](#)

LEGAL BRIEFINGS

[Hitting the mainstream: how litigation funding is becoming a thriving industry](#)

[Cross-border leveraged lending: US intercreditor agreements for financings with European elements](#)

[The outlook for planning under the new](#)

Greenberg Traurig Maher London chair Paul Maher's clients are equally positive: "Paul makes it his life's work to be at the disposal of clients," comments Shaun Grady, vice president, strategic partnering and business development at AstraZeneca.

Michael Herlihy, GC at Smiths Group, adds: "Many lawyers will tell you: we're very client-focused, we put the client first. But Paul actually brings that as close to reality as anybody I've ever worked with. I've never asked him to, but I'm sure if I asked Paul to run through a wall on my behalf, he'd give it a go."

Partner perspectives

What, in turn, are the partners' perceptions of what clients want?

Stanley believes that his clients have high expectations. "I don't switch my phone off at night, I've got clients around the world," he explains. "We are in business to give people a pretty timely response. The timeframe that we are allowed to respond in is becoming ever-tighter – we are constantly becoming more efficient to meet client demand and competitive pressure."



Coates is keen to emphasise her broader role at CC in "introducing clients to other services where they might need support". She adds: "You have to be on top of your game all of the time – you're not given a second chance."

Gellman sees working with clients as a partnership: "You need to share with them and be open with them about information; for example, how you're going to deal with something and what the approach is."

She highlights "the corporate needs of each particular client, understanding what they need strategically, but also personally: where are they going, why are they doing this, why are they talking to me in the first place, what is it that they need from a business perspective?"

"What really motivates me, what gets me to work every day, is the people – getting to know them and their businesses and what makes them tick."

Williams believes that client success largely rests on "being approachable, contactable and as flexible as possible. You need to have a constant presence, to be someone who clients enjoy engaging with – there's really no point being an absolutely brilliant legal mind if you can't also engage with clients on a personal level."

Probed on his success, Herbst agrees: "I'd like to think it's empathetic judgement – clients want a judgement on what is going to happen, a balanced assessment of the risks. They don't want someone who is arrogant and will tell them everything with certainty."

Jackson develops the empathy theme: "You have to care about your clients. You have to care personally about the outcomes for them. In terms of relationships, clients will see that you're trying to give more of yourself. If you invest in the relationships, you want the best for your clients and they can see that you go the extra mile."

"Ultimately what we're selling as lawyers is relationships. Yes, of course the technical legal advice is absolutely critical but, when you get to a certain stage in your career, that's taken as a given. So then it becomes a question of: do clients want to spend time with you as a person?"

Maher points to the old adage: if you want something done, ask a busy lawyer. "That isn't necessarily wrong," he says. "Response time, dedication – if the client wants it, try and super perform, try and give people what they want and then a little bit more."

In dealing with blue-chip clients, he advises: "Multinationals are collections of individuals,

[Conservative administration](#)

[Litigation: when and how a court might revisit a judgment](#)

[The meaning of 'fraud' for prescription purposes under Jersey law](#)

Search

they're not some amorphous organisation. You've got to understand the strategy of the individuals in that organisation, what they want, what a GC wants and how you can add value."

Legal Week's CSR report found that law firms were generally perceived as delivering both better value and higher quality this year than last year. There is a but. Clients see room for further improvement in narrowing the gap between expectation and satisfaction in relation to cost and in the quality of commercial advice. They want even better value. So what can the best client partners do to achieve this?

"Being available as much as you can be, within reason," says Herbst. "There's always a tension between [being available] and being so available that your life and your team's life becomes unbearable. Also caring and understanding – not just the technical side of what clients are doing but also the human understanding: they are also now under enormous personal pressure. The old days when the GC or head of compliance had a much easier job than me have gone. This is a huge change."

Jackson is equally direct: "The litmus for me is: am I the first person they pick up the phone to in a crisis? Also, at the end of a transaction, when we've spent 18-hour days together, are they totally happy and satisfied with the experience and the service we've delivered? If I am that first port of call, the person they pick up the phone to in a crisis, that makes me feel as though I'm doing something right."

Words of wisdom from this year's shortlisted client partners

"Being approachable, contactable and as flexible as possible in the relationships that you've developed with your clients – that all adds in to where work ends up. Ultimately, if firms have a similar legal offering, it has to be a factor that differentiates."

Rebecca Williams, Addleshaw Goddard



"We take phone calls in the middle of whatever else we might be doing at weekends or in the evenings: you're expected to be available. It's one of the things you need to do to develop and preserve client relationships. If you don't pick up the phone, then I'm sure there'll be another partner somewhere who will."

Katherine Coates, Clifford Chance

"If you assume that your clients are just not doing anything, the danger is they're not doing anything with you. It's likely that they're doing things, they're just doing different things. You can anticipate the market; you can present opportunities to them."

Logan Mair, Ashurst



"There is a tension in everything we do – in balancing the need to be ever-more specialised with the need for enough breadth of experience to bring an innovative approach."

Ian Stanley, Allen & Overy

"If you train and you run a lot, you get a bit faster. The more



Paul Maher, Greenberg Traurig Maher

work you do, the longer hours you do, the better you are at it, simply because you're getting more experience."

"We need to be responsive and act quickly, but also to manage client expectations as to what they need and when they really need it. You can



give an instant reaction, but it might not be a helpful approach – try to deal with it instantly and the advice is probably not very good."

Louise Gellman, Nabarro



"You have to be honest with clients, you can't know everything – that's just not the way it works. The real problem for our profession is that it's still generically based on individual practice areas, which is totally outdated."

Jonathan Herbst, Norton Rose Fulbright

"I always tell junior lawyers: don't send emails to clients, pick up the phone and have a conversation with them. In the internet age and with the generation that is used to social media and texting, you lose that personal connection and things get misconstrued or misinterpreted. There's no substitute for picking up the phone and having a conversation, or meeting with clients. I don't think that will change under any circumstances."

David Jackson, Shoosmiths

For queries relating to the Legal Week Intelligence Client Satisfaction Report 2015 contact lara.rosenthal@incisivemedia.com.

Tags: [Corporate](#) / [m&a](#)

[Send](#) [Print](#) [Share](#) [Comment](#)

FURTHER READING

[Satisfaction rises as clients benefit from flexi-working](#)

[Macfarlanes, Mishcon de Reya and LV among prize winners at British Legal Awards 2014](#)

[Legal Week unveils shortlist of Best Client Partners](#)

[British Legal Awards 2013: who won what - and why...](#)

[Norton Rose](#)

MOST READ

[Lloyds fires starting gun on litigation contract race after in-house job cuts](#)

[At your service – what makes the best client partners stand out from the crowd?](#)

[Stephenson Harwood drops ex-Leeds United boss case after non-payment of fees](#)

[White & Case ties up with Indonesian firm](#)

[Clifford Chance's top-tier partners in jeopardy as firm approves lockstep overhaul](#)

COMMENTS