

“Complacency kills: change before you *have to*”

Individuals and firms who resist or ignore change will wither and die, says Peter Scott

A tsunami of change is coming to professional services. If you thought the past few years have been a whirlwind, just wait and see. The pace of change is going to get faster due to rapidly evolving client demands, alternative business models and ever-accelerating technological development. To reflect that, you'll need to do things differently. You'll have to respond by working smarter, faster and better. How does that make you feel? Scared? Tired? Invigorated? All three?

There's a fantastic saying by Jack Welch, known as 'Nuclear Jack', who was CEO of General Electric in the US for over 20 years. He said: "Change before you *have to*." In other words, if you rest on your laurels and are eventually *forced* to change, the process becomes painful. That's why you must embrace change today and make it your ally. The most successful people do not sit around dreaming up ways to counter change; rather they develop strategies to use it to their advantage. "OK," they say, "these things are happening, let's adapt and ride that wave."

To do that well, perhaps the most important question professionals must ask is: "What does our firm look like from the client's point of view?" Followed by: "What *should* our firm look like from the client's point of view?" Because change has to be client driven. The client must think: yes, that firm makes sense to us; they can provide exactly what we want.

When considering how best to face up to change, it's useful to consider why clients choose one firm over another. It's clearly down to the expertise of the people in that business, but crucially it's not just related to *what* they deliver – because almost all firms in any given peer group can deliver what their clients require – it's also linked to *how* they deliver. The client wants a fantastic experience *en route* to the desired result – being able to offer that is a key differentiator. They want to achieve their objectives while enjoying rewarding relationships with professionals who know how to offer the right services in the right way.

Responsiveness is high up on clients' hierarchy of reasons for selecting a firm. Likeability is important too. You don't want to do business with people you don't like. Life is too short. Can you manufacture likeability? I say yes – it's about culture. If you make an effort to look after your clients in the very best way, and if you give the right advice in a way they appreciate, you're well on your way to being liked. You may have to deliver difficult messages, so you've got to do that in a way that makes the client think: "Wow, that's constructive and positive; that's not negative."

So having the right attitude – a hunger to win and impress – is the driver for taking your change in the right direction. Firms that rest on their laurels and past reputations – and there are many out there – will eventually fall away, because what

matters is your reputation right now and how you're going to build that for the future. Yes reputation is about brand. But what is brand? Brand is what's *in* you. It's not a logo, it's the substance of a firm... ultimately your brand depends on how you operate and deliver.

So my message is to change before you have to, because complacency is the greatest danger. Take a hard look at yourself: understand what your firm is great at, and what it's not so great at, and don't delude yourself; above all, find out what your clients want from you in the future. Only by doing that will you respond effectively – and painlessly – to the forces of change.

Peter Scott was for eight years the managing partner of Eversheds' London and European offices. Today he acts as an advisor, trainer and coach to many law firms and other professional firms in the UK and abroad. He is regularly asked to act as a 'discreet mentor' to managing partners and CEOs.

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