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## Value of firm friends left untapped

By Claire Smith

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In May, leading UK law firm Linklaters hired out the Nereid Room in the British Museum for a party. Gathered together were 200 of the firm's former employees, now working with potential clients all over the City.

In Belgium earlier this month, a further 100 alumni from the Brussels office got together to remember the old days.

The firm is in the process of "re-energising" an alumni programme first set up five years ago, according to Tony Angel, Linklaters' managing partner. A website dedicated to the cause will soon come online.

He says: "We recruit hundreds of people a year, and a relatively small proportion of those will stay and make partner. A huge number go elsewhere, and they are the most phenomenal source of working relationships. Sustaining those relationships, and making sure we get the best out of the investment we have made in those people, is very important."

The May party was the culmination of a renewed effort to track former employees, and remind them of a few loyalties.

Linklaters is not alone in letting such a programme drift. A report from business consultancy Gracechurch reveals vast untapped goodwill among former staff of professional services firms, with many of them bemoaning the limits of their one-time employer's alumni programmes.

Lawyers and accountants tend to leave the professions for the upper echelons of industry, and are often in a position to place work with their best contacts. Gracechurch surveyed alumni from 49 accountancy firms and 51 law firms. Although the majority were members of alumni programmes, 70 per cent of those surveyed said they were never actively targeted for sales or marketing reasons by their old employer, even though they expected to be.

Indeed, a third of those questioned said that if asked, they would be open to assisting former employers with business development, market research, training or recruitment initiatives.

Chris Aujard left UK law firm Norton Rose in 1996 after working there for eight years, and is now head of group legal and compliance at Singer & Friedlander, the financial services business. He has been a part of Norton Rose's active alumni programme ever since leaving - and agrees that firms are not getting the most from their alumni.

"The great value of the programme is at the informal networking level," he says. "While Norton Rose has done some business development with the alumni, my sense is that the opportunity is under-exploited. With the long-servers from Norton Rose there is generally pretty much goodwill on both sides, so I'm always surprised they don't do more focus-group type activities."

He says law firms, unlike accounting firms, seem shy to ask their ex-workers to help them garner instructions, even though they would be happy to help.

"I don't think they realise how valuable it is to be linked into that network, to hear about things they are lobbying the government about, or what other companies are doing about setting up panels," says Mr Aujard. "The alumni programme tends to focus on the legal technical stuff, and frankly when you get to a certain level of seniority, that's not so important."

Still, he says, the firm may have some advantage in an upcoming law firm panel selection process that Singer & Friedlander has planned, because he has a clear understanding of Norton Rose's strengths and weaknesses.

Helen Hannan, a director at Gracechurch, says there is a tendency for people to

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assume that alumni programmes will pick up opportunities. "When we were talking to firms about their programmes, the majority did not seem to have a clear, uniform strategy. The programmes were not integrated into other parts of the firm, like human resources or business development."

More than 80 per cent of those surveyed said they would recommend their former firm as a place to work, and a third said they would consider working for the firm again, highlighting the huge potential for recruitment and rehiring.

Research in the US by SelectMinds, a company that specialises in setting up corporate alumni programmes, has found that some accountancy firms now attract as many as one in 10 new recruits through their alumni network.

Since headhunting fees can reach 35 per cent of annual salary costs in these businesses, it is money well worth saving.

"The accounting firms use these programmes a lot more effectively on the human resources side than law firms do," says Ms Á,ÁHannan.

As professional services firms become increasingly international, so the resource of former employees scattered around the globe becomes more valuable. Linklaters has discovered that more than 100 of its alumni are now based in Asia, for example, which could form a useful network as the firm builds its business there.

Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, the Los Angeles-headquartered law firm, has just hired SelectMinds to set up its alumni website in an attempt to reach an increasingly disparate audience. Margie Lewis, joint managing partner of the Los Angeles office, says: "Everybody is on computers all day long, and it became clear to us that it was the most effective and efficient way of reaching our people and keeping our alumni connected to us."

She appreciates that such an investment is just the start: "The website is effective for reaching people, but to really nurture those relationships, you do have to do that on a one-to-one basis, a face-to-face over lunch or dinner."

However, since clients increasingly use panels to allocate work, it can seem that personal relationships are less important. Bjarnie Anderson, until a year ago the director of legal operations at Barclays, says: "Panels mean alumni relationships are less critical."

"At Barclays the lawyers who came in were usually experienced hires. Although they had knowledge of their previous firms, they relied upon the company's established panel process and its guidelines for instructing law firms."

Nevertheless, SelectMinds found in one study that as much as 50 per cent of some law firms' business generation could be linked to alumni.

Now may be the time to re-energise your programme too.



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