

## Should you specialise?

By Louis Rood

To grow your legal practice and attract more lucrative work, do you try to expand the range of services you offer, or do you concentrate on becoming an expert on a particular aspect of law?

There are different points of view:

- **Generalist:** Knowing a little about a lot enables you to retain your clients for all their legal requirements. You can always outsource – for example, by briefing counsel – if you need additional expertise. The skills and knowledge you acquire in one sphere, such as labour negotiations, can benefit you in other spheres. When one aspect of your practice goes through a lean period, you will have other sources of work to rely on.
- **Specialist:** Knowing a lot about a little enables you to attract more clients seeking that particular expertise, which may not generally be available. You can grow your distinctive brand as a specialist, and differentiate yourself from your competitors. You can concentrate all your efforts and energies on a narrower field and so really build up your specialist knowledge. But if all your eggs are in one basket, do not drop the basket.

Research on which is the better approach varies. Specialisation seems to be an advantage throughout a professional career, but it is less important earlier in a career. Later on, specialisation signals that the practitioner already has broader experience. Even with specialists, general ability is required. But specialisation does not necessarily reflect accumulated skills – calling yourself an expert does not make you an expert.

Of course, the particular personality and temperament of the individual also determine the focus of his or her practice. Not everyone is suited to be a jack of all trades and master of none. Others thrive in that role, delegate well, and would soon be bored in a defined channel.

Here are some pointers for building a specialist practice:

- **Create a specialist CV:** This should highlight your unique speciality. It should describe your specific attributes and experience.
- **Build a name for yourself online:** Brand yourself as a specialist through professional networking and social media sites. Add key words to your profile that reflect your specialisation. Participate in groups in your area of interest. Contribute to online discussions.
- **Be yourself:** Your niche practice should strongly interest and suit you. You will be motivated to acquire additional training and qualifications in that area. Focussing on what you enjoy is more likely to lead to long-term success.
- **Market yourself:** In a competitive field a specialist needs to be noticed. Participate in any industry associations whose members require your specialist services. Attend their conventions. Offer your services as a presenter, speaker or panellist. Write for their media publications.

## Shape up

Both specialist and general practitioners would do well to adopt a strategic approach to giving shape and substance to their practice. This comprises four dimensions:

- **Breadth:** Expand and extend the range of your skills and capabilities, even within your speciality.
- **Depth:** Gain comprehensive knowledge and understanding of every aspect of your subject.
- **Height:** Become prominent in your field. Aim high and stand out from the crowd, head and shoulders above your competitors.
- **Length:** Build and consolidate a sustainable practice with the resources and trained people to continue to serve clients in the long-term.

Ultimately, every successful attorney has to acquire and apply knowledge, skills and expertise, and so gain experience and build a reputation that attracts a client base.

The very best attorneys all become specialists – either single specialists or multi-specialists. Successfully juggling all the balls in a generalist practice could in itself be considered to be a speciality.

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