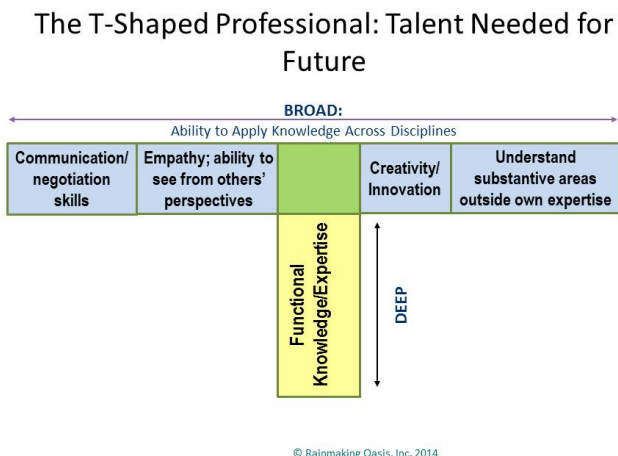


## Are You a T- or I-Shaped Lawyer?

May 14 Posted by [Susan Saltonstall Duncan](#) in [Law firm management](#)

*Blogger's Note: You may have noticed a hiatus in the publishing of my blog posts, for which I apologize. It has not been for lack of interest or ideas but rather due to numerous pressing demands in my practice. I will try to return to a regular schedule of publishing at least on a monthly basis.*



[BTI Consulting](#), which regularly surveys in-house counsel, has identified seventeen characteristics that the top law firms use to develop superior client service. Of those seventeen, four deliver superior financial results – these are activities that according to clients are considered both important and also scarce among law firms in the market.

These include:

1. Understands a client's business
2. Is client-focused

3. Provides value for the money

4. Is committed to helping

It is clear that clients want their lawyers to be much more than experts in their fields. Led by businesses in the UK, many in-house counsel have placed an emphasis on needing lawyers that are “commercial.” As we explored in [“Effective Client-Adviser Relationships” Part 2: Commerciality](#), this means much more than just knowing the business and industry clients are in. It means really having a deep understanding of the business itself:

- How products and services are produced or manufactured and marketed
- Their distribution channels
- Their financial, pricing and profit model, i.e., how the company makes money
- Their operational risks and risk tolerance
- Who the company's customers are
- Who their competitors are
- How their legal matters and approaches fit into the company's overall risk profile and/or strategy.

Client themselves, especially those in the general counsel or chief legal officer position, are under great pressure also to understand all aspects of the business as they now often have a seat at the business/executive table, and not just as leader of the legal department. We explored this in our post [Value Post 3: Like Law Firms, GCs Must Deliver More Value to Their Clients](#). Given the changing dynamic both of what is expected of clients themselves and what they now expect of their outside counsel, the skills profile of the successful lawyer has changed.

## Lawyers Weren't Always I-shaped

Decades ago, lawyers were generalists and more often served in an advisory role. They may have served as general counsel to companies, providing advice on everything from the corporate books and the boardroom to real estate and disputes. But as regulations became more complex in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, the need for specialization and more depth in specific areas drove lawyers to narrow their skills and become experts in their field. This was accelerated by clients who began selecting lawyers on their track record of success and experience in specialized areas and industries. Lawyers developed deep expertise in a specialty along the vertical bar of a “T” and hence, were “I-shaped.”

Lawyers now need to add skills along the horizontal bar of the T, shifting from being I-shaped to T-shaped. While there will still be a role for lawyers who only are deep technical experts, lawyers who wish to become trusted advisers and client relationship lawyers must develop additional, critical skill sets. Introduced and heavily used in the 1990s by IDEO and McKinsey, and more recently by IBM and CISCO, the T-shaped professional embodies the skills employers in many fields are pursuing, hiring, promoting and rewarding.

## "T" versus "I" Characteristics

T-shaped professionals have trans-disciplinary knowledge that is both broad and deep – they are experts in their field but also can think broadly about other disciplines. I-shaped professionals are those that have very deep, specialized knowledge in one or two disciplines but limited, if any, knowledge or skill in other disciplines and characteristics. In law firms, many successful client relationship partners and rainmakers are t-shaped. The skills embodied in the horizontal bar of the T usually include:

- Creativity; innovation
- Communication, including ability to negotiate and collaborate
- Ability to apply knowledge across disciplines
- Empathy including ability to put oneself in others’ shoes and understand other cultures
- Understanding of substantive areas outside one's own area of expertise.

As technology continues to automate many tasks previously done by people, and as clients continue to use non-traditional legal service providers for work that is more routinized, law firms will have to focus on the unique skills and benefits that their lawyers offer to clients. This will impact the way law firms hire, train, advance and compensate the lawyers in their firms. It should also accelerate the recognition that those trained in other disciplines who often embody more of the T-shaped skills, e.g., human resources, talent management (recruiting, training and advancement,) marketing and business development, and knowledge management should play a more prominent role in how firms are led and managed.

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