

What Rainmaker Traits and Skills are Required for Success?

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For so many years, the term “rainmakers” has referred to partners in firms who bring in new clients and have “big books of business.” Merriam-Webster defines a rainmaker as “A person (as a partner in a law firm) who brings in new business.” Fifty years ago, many firms relied on only one or two or just a handful of rainmakers and the rest of the lawyers served the clients the rainmakers brought in. More recently, the number of rainmakers in firms has grown but most firms still consider only a very small number of partners responsible for a majority of the revenue. There may be as few as twenty-five partners in a firm of a thousand lawyers who are credited for generating 80% of the business in the firm. Some firms have placed such a premium on recruiting and rewarding rainmakers that it has been a factor in their demise, as we know from the recent [Dewey collapse](#).

Most of us who think of effective rainmakers typically use the following words to describe them:

- Charismatic
- Socially adept, a schmoozer, a networker
- Involved in the community; large circle of connections
- A self-promoter (a few verging on braggart); big ego
- Confident and resilient
- Relationship-builder; connects on a personal level
- Reputation and expertise

Dr. Larry Richard, principal of LawyerBrain LLC, is a former trial lawyer and consulting psychologist who has done extensive consulting and research on the effects of personality on lawyers, leadership and management. His findings indicate there are several key traits in which rainmakers have much higher scores than non-rainmakers: ego drive, resilience and empathy. Rainmakers also typically score higher on sociability, risk-taking, self-confidence and assertiveness than non-rainmakers.

When discussing the value and effectiveness of business development and sales training, law firm leaders often ask me “Can you really teach someone to be a rainmaker? Aren’t rainmakers just born with the ability?” My response usually is “In my experience, about 20% of partners in law firms have innate ability to be natural rainmakers and about 20% will never be comfortable with anything resembling sales and may even be uncomfortable in client relationship interactions. The 60% in between, however, can be taught skills and approaches that will make many of them much more effective at growing business, deepening relationships and attracting new clients. And even the top 20% can improve.”

This is still true -- the 60% in the middle can be taught sales skills that will make them more effective in developing new business from new clients. It is also true, however, that the definition of rainmaker has changed in some important ways. Beyond the traditional rainmaking skills of bringing the new clients in the door, the most effective rainmakers of today must have the ability to convert new clients into long-term, loyal relationships that generate long-term profitability. The ability to accomplish this is a skill that many traditional rainmakers had but others did not. In fact, I believe there is a new model for the successful rainmaker of today that will drive success in the law firm of tomorrow. The sooner firms recognize this and develop the recruiting, training, retention and reward/compensation systems, the more resilient and successful these firms will be.

In the "new normal," truly effective rainmakers who can bring meaningful growth and profits to law firms will be those partners who excel at client relationships, service and value. They will be able to build trust by delivering value as defined by each client, building the right team and approach to client needs, and by doing so, growing representation of (and revenue from) that client by gaining a larger share of the work they send to outside firms. Bringing new business in the door will require much more than a charismatic, forceful personality. Rainmakers of tomorrow will be exceptionally skilled at:

- Truly listening to clients and engaging in meaningful discussions about expectations, preferences and needs and who will best be suited to address needs
- Defining productivity and goals by outputs not by total hours billed or tasks and being creative and willing to look at various options for staffing and pricing
- Taking a commercial approach to a client's legal problems; helping clients address and solve problems faced by the business
- Understanding their business and industry and staying ahead of trends, bringing solutions to clients before problems
- Being proficient in project and process management, staffing and technology tools
- Building and leading teams and understanding what makes people tick
- Communication at every level that focuses on what is best for the client
- Systematically seeking and employing feedback for continuous improvement
- Continually looking for ways to provide value through collaboration, knowledge management and process improvement

These competencies will be reflected in those who have personality traits conducive to these skills, e.g., high levels of empathy and emotional intelligence. Many of these skills are not embodied by today's rainmakers. Perhaps more telling, many partners who are excelling in these areas may still not be recognized or rewarded as top rainmakers in their firms, but considered "service partners" and compensated (i.e., valued) at a lower level. As referenced in a [Strategic Account Management Must Be About Client Value First, Not Sales](#) most companies and other professional service firms have long understood the need to put existing key customers first. They have made SAM the bedrock of their sales programs. With all the challenges ahead for law firms, those that succeed will take a good, hard look at what they value and compensate. Bringing new business in the door is only the beginning. The much tougher part is succeeding in exceeding client expectations on multiple levels and forging a long-term partnership with clients that provides mutual benefit.

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