

V&E Is Training Associates To Think Like Business People

By Tracey Read

Law360 (August 27, 2025, 12:00 PM EDT) -- When Vinson & Elkins LLP partner and international construction head Roberta Downey became a lawyer 34 years ago, business development training for attorneys was something she never heard discussed.

But Downey, who is based in London, said recently it's no longer enough just to focus on legal skills.

"What clients want is businesspeople with legal skills, rather than lawyers," she said. "They want us to understand the business. They want us to think like a businessperson. And that's really a very hard thing to teach."

But V&E is doing just that with BD Lab, a firmwide program for associates. BD Lab was launched in January 2024 and features quarterly training programs on networking, cross-selling, personal branding and client engagement — all tailored to each lawyer's level and style.

Downey said BD Lab is not a one-size-fits-all approach to business development, but more like a fun exercise program.

"We don't all have to go and run round the park or swim laps or do weights in a gym," she said. "You choose whether it's baseball or basketball or yoga. You choose what suits you and what you like, and you look at things and see whether it works."

With BD Lab, associates choose their "own bespoke business plan," said Downey.

Randi M. Revisore, the firm's Houston-based chief business development officer, said that while V&E previously had business development programming in the past, associates had been expressing that they were hungry for content beyond traditional one-hour sessions of continuing legal education, and so BD Lab was born.



Vinson & Elkins LLP held a BD Lab session March 4 titled, "Integrating AI Into Your Business Development Strategies." On-screen speakers were (left to right): New York-based Chief Innovation Officer Aubrey Bishai and Houston-based business development manager Kelsey Broussard. (Courtesy of Vinson & Elkins)

Recognizing that associates are digesting content in different ways than lawyers did even 10 years ago, BD Lab emphasizes "micro content."

"We named it BD Lab after a science lab," Revisore said. "Like you go to a lecture, but then you have your science lab on the side, right? That's where you go and practice what you just heard, and that is the piece of it that I have spent so much time thinking about beyond the 'Oh, let's just check the box and offer them a one-hour program at lunch.'"

Each quarter, a different theme drives the programming. One aspect of BD Lab is that rather than offer dry presentations, firm rainmakers talk informally via webinars about how they've become successful.

"What makes it unique is you're getting real stories," Downey said. "We all remember stories. And you're getting them from people who've lived through it, and they're telling you what's worked, and what's not worked ... as you're coming up to partnership."

Lawyers can either watch the stories live or go back and watch the recordings later.

The time investment for partners is easy — basically only the span of the webinar with a little prep time is needed, because they're just telling a story as if they're having a cup of coffee with colleagues.

For instance, a program on branding featured several partners talking about what works for them.

"Some people love to go golfing," Revisore said. "Some people love to do a client dinner. Some people want to go to museums. Some people focus on the legal side of it."

Downey emphasized that while partners can create a slideshow, the focus is on having a conversation.

"The younger generation doesn't want to read a five-page memo about how I won this job," Downey said.

Revisore said the firm is also financially committed to the programming, noting that V&E has set aside money for various client events for each office to support associates in practicing their business development soft skills. For instance, in Austin, Texas, associates put on a barbecue event themselves.

"It's funny — when you see the partners do this, it seems so natural to them," she said.

But at first, associates may struggle a bit.

"We have huge firm events that are, by and large, led by the partners, but this is kind of a mini version of that, so that by the time they are at that level, they've learned these skills," Revisore said of event hosting. "Not only who's a good person to invite, but how do I reach out to them and say, 'Hey, I really want you to come.' And then once I'm there in the room with them, like, 'What do I say?' 'How do I tell



Vinson & Elkins LLP's "Evolution of a Successful Client Relationship" BD Lab session was held June 11 with counsel Andy Beach (top left) speaking on screen and an in-person panel with Houston partners (left to right): Mike Telle, Jim Thompson III and Lina Dimachkieh. (Courtesy of Vinson & Elkins)

our story without being too impersonal about it?' So it's exciting to watch them go through that process."

Jeff Slusher is a Dallas-based fifth-year associate whose practice focuses on the U.S. federal income tax aspects of domestic and international transactions and tax planning matters. He said BD Lab has been helpful as he and other associates planned their first external client event, which will be held next month at Birdie's Eastside, a Dallas casual eatery with an outdoor turf playing area.

"The associates have curated a client list," Slusher said. "For the most part, it's not the CEOs and the CFOs, it's the analysts that we've been working with. It's people a little bit more junior in the organization that we've seen more constantly."

The associates on Slusher's team decided it would be a good idea to invite clients' families, as well.

"A lot of us have young kids," he said. "A lot of us have significant others. So we've made a real push that we would love to know more about you. We'd love to meet the people that you care about. So we made [the event] on a Friday from 3:30 to 6:30 to hopefully allow time for people to pick up their kids from school and bring them on by. It'll be the first time that we're doing something like this."

A lot of care went into choosing not only the venue and the time of day, but the list of invitees.

"We realized people enjoy bringing their families around," he said. "It's nice being able to do this on the associate side and getting to see what makes people tick. Of course, we want to be here for the technical aspect of their practice, but to do that, you need to be there for the personal part of their lives, too."

Slusher said BD Lab has also proven helpful on an everyday basis.

"It's made me be more conscious about reaching out to the mid-level and the senior associates within the other groups I work with constantly," he said.

"Email is easier, and often is a lot quicker. But nothing can beat face-to-face. I've always been good about going around seeing the [internal] people in their offices. But one thing I haven't done is, just during the day, taking the time to pick up the phone if I haven't heard from someone [external] in a while, whether we're on an active deal or not, just checking in to see how they're doing."

--Editing by Amy French.