

Taking charge of chambers

Continuing our coverage of the Bar conference this weekend, Linda Tsang finds that many lawyers are switching practice for management



[Linda Tsang](#)

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Barristers need business nous as well as legal knowledge if they are to move into chambers management

- Chief executives now sit alongside business development and marketing consultants
- Chambers directors can earn up to £200,000 a year
- Duties include dealing with the cost of premises, administration, technology systems and staff

What do an equerry to Prince Charles, a barrister-diplomat and a Sydney University law graduate all have in common?

They are all running barristers' chambers, having joined the growing ranks of set chief executives this year.

Will Mackinlay, who trained at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, is now director at South Square chambers in Gray's Inn. Sarah McCarthy, among the first barristers to switch from practising to management, is chambers director at Coram Chambers in London. And Mark Rowlands is chief executive at Lamb Chambers in the Temple.

They are unusual because it is usually solicitors who take chambers leadership roles, with the two most high profile being Liz Dux and Lindsay Scott.

Dux joined Littleton Chambers in the Temple as chambers director in January, having been a partner at the national law firm Slater & Gordon, where she represented many of the victims of Jimmy Savile. Scott, chief executive at Matrix Chambers in Gray's Inn, will move to 39 Essex Chambers in the same role this year.

Although chief executives or chambers directors have been in demand since the 1990s, these roles now often sit alongside a marketing and business development consultant.

Driving that evolution is the amount of marketing that now gets pumped out by chambers. The verbiage may not be on the same level as a top-tier City of London law firm, but it is substantially worse than a decade ago.

One chambers management veteran says: “There are more meetings, functions and those pesky directories, which require more and more work.

“There was a time when barristers seemed to think that employing ex-army officers was a good idea. But this soon stopped once the barristers realised that they, the barristers, didn't like being ordered about. Ex-solicitors are always a good bet as they know what solicitors expect from a chambers.”

In fact, those two trends are reflected in the two people who chair the Legal Practice Management Association, an organisation for those involved in management at the Bar and in law firms. One is Robin Jackson, who did a stint in the military and then at the consultancy Financial Dynamics (now FTI) before his current role as chambers director at 3 Verulam Buildings. The other is Catherine Calder, who started as a solicitor at the law firm Macfarlanes before becoming an account manager at Bates Dorland, an advertising agency that's part of the Saatchi Group, and finally moving to chambers management. She is now director of client care at Serjeants' Inn.

Not for everyone

Developing and managing barristers' business is not a career opportunity sought by many lawyers. Littleton's Dux says: “The role of chambers director was not one that I had contemplated but, after 28 years in practice, it felt natural to move into a different arena of legal management. It is not a role that would suit those who are relatively junior in the legal profession. A few grey hairs and years of experience are needed to earn the respect of clients and barristers alike.”

But it is not just respect that needs to be earned. According to one QC, the decision to hire chambers directors is made on the basis that the recruit will add value. As to how sets can quantify the return on recruiting chief executives or business development consultants and whether they are value for money, Calder of Serjeants' Inn says: “These kinds of appointments increase profits both indirectly — because it releases the barristers from management to concentrate on their cases and clients — and directly through the strategic and commercial skills those individuals bring to the set.”

Fiona Fitzgerald, another former solicitor who is now the chief executive at Radcliffe Chambers in Lincoln's Inn, highlights the client's perspective. “Solicitors are looking for commercially savvy barristers and a wider market understanding,” she says.

“So an understanding of costs, funding, where work is coming from and client needs can provide a solicitor switching to chambers management with some unique selling points in the market. Chambers are recognising this, and that people are no longer willing to simply rely on a name.”

Fitzgerald adds that her set has had a 70 per cent increase in turnover in the three years since she joined.

Nick Rees, managing director at the recruitment consultancy GRL Legal, says that chief executive roles or those with a similarly title roles will often have a set of key objectives. Among them is expanding the business and professionalising the chambers, along with attracting and retaining business.

“Business development roles will often have targets and remuneration will be linked to numbers on the board or the increase in the bottom line. The Bar is now far more willing to move people on than it was,” he says.

It is estimated that chambers director roles at leading sets can carry six-figure salaries with some as high as £200,000. Therefore, any candidate must come to an interview armed with their own business plan to pitch to the set.

Measuring success

The chambers will also have an outline business plan, usually covering three years, that deals with fee income and growth, law firms that it wants to target and an idea of the number of cases it wants to attract within a certain time.

Prospective recruits for the chambers director role will need a plan for speeding recovery of outstanding debt and potentially for cost-cutting. Responsibility for dealing with the cost of premises, administration, technology systems and staff will be passed to the chief executive.

There will be feedback every four or six months and updates on progress so chambers should know within a year if those targets are being met, or can be.

However, according to one QC: "Success is difficult to gauge. The recruit would probably point to an increase in chambers' turnover or a significant shift in profile. But the real issue is whether such things would have happened in any event.

"In reality I suspect success is gauged in a much less scientific way. Clearly, if you have an impressive individual who can bring about radical and effective change, that will speak for itself."

Top dogs

Will Mackinlay, the former Sandhurst-trained army officer was equerry to the Prince of Wales. He has also served as an executive director at UBS, where he was chief of staff to the head of the investment arm. He joined South Square as chambers director in March.

Jemma Tagg, a former dispute resolution lawyer who was head of international relations at the City of London law firm Slaughter and May before joining 20 Essex Street as director of strategic development in May.

Vincent Denham, who has held a number of chief executive roles at law firms, was chambers director at Lamb Chambers and went to 42 Bedford Row in London in June.

Sarah McCarthy worked as a diplomatic lawyer and was the first UK liaison prosecutor to South Africa. She joined Coram Chambers in July as chambers director.

Mark Rowlands moved from Allens-Linklaters in Sydney to the UK in 2004. He has worked for the City law firms Bird & Bird, Dechert and Reed Smith, and was head of business development for Europe at the US firm King & Spalding. He joined Lamb Chambers as chief executive in September.

Richard Hanney, former senior partner at the law firm Matthew Arnold & Baldwin, had a marketing and development role at Selborne Chambers in London before joining Radcliffe Chambers as business development consultant last month.

Lisa Pavlovsky, a former litigation solicitor at the City of London law firm Herbert Smith, became one of the first solicitors to switch to practice manager when she joined 12 King's Bench Walk in the Temple. She is now marketing and business development manager at Devereux Chambers in

London, and will take up the role of administration and marketing manager at Hogarth Chambers in Lincoln's Inn this month.