

# MIND THE CLIENT EXPERIENCE GAPS

THE BIG IDEA

As competition increases and GCs' expectations rise, the end-to-end client experience can make or break the relationship between in-house teams and their law firms. Marketing and business development experts from DAC Beachcroft, Mishcon de Reya, Simmons & Simmons and Stevens & Bolton speak to Briefing editor Andrea Dulgheru about where the biggest frictions in the client journey lie, and what steps they are taking to deliver greater value in a seamless way

In today's complex and volatile world, general counsel demand more than sound legal advice from their law firms. In

the face of adversity and rapid technological growth in recent years, many legal business development leaders have observed a shift in client expectations — now seeking firms that can act as proactive, commercially-minded partners that understand their business challenges and deliver solutions tailored to their needs.

Technology is a major force influencing this direction of travel, disrupting both how clients purchase legal services and how firms deliver them, explains Darren Cleveland, head of business development and marketing at Stevens & Bolton. "With tech and AI now prominent in the legal space, this in turn has amplified the importance of trust and reliability — qualities that clients are increasingly looking for in their chosen legal partner. Authenticity is the new currency."

GCs expect this reliability to be showcased through the ability to deliver high-quality, consistent global legal advice and proactive support that helps them anticipate and navigate potential business threats — regardless of which specific team from the firm delivers the service — note Simmons & Simmons' global client

## BRIEF(ING) SNAPSHOT

Given the current volatile climate and technology disrupting how general counsel purchase legal services, clients now seek:

- Faster onboarding and service delivery
- Constant and speedy communication throughout the progress of a matter
- Greater transparency and fee predictability
- Consistent, unified service regardless of practice area or geography
- High-quality horizon-scanning support to help them anticipate and navigate potential business threats.

Above all, clients are now demanding a seamless and consistent end-to-end experience, from the initial conversation and pitching process, all the way to billing. However, firm leaders note frictions in the client journey often occur at several stages, due to:

- Lack of client intelligence and active listening to their needs — resulting in difficulties winning work, maintaining existing relationships and securing cross-selling opportunities
- Siloed data and workflows leading to inconsistent standards across teams, and poor communication and service delivery

• Tech sprawl and inconsistent fee-tracking resulting in frictions at the billing stage.

What are law firms doing to improve the end-to-end client journey?

• Stevens & Bolton has created a six-month client catalyst programme for all its partners to hone their BD skills and enable them to build stronger client relationships.

• Mishcon de Reya has appointed a new GC relationship director, and launched a new GC Academy to equip in-house teams with valuable tools and practical skills.

• Simmons & Simmons has revamped its entire onboarding process — including a move to an AI-powered platform and allocating due diligence responsibilities to the business acceptance team. It has reduced onboarding time from two weeks to two days.

• DAC Beachcroft has introduced a new client onboarding process, which collates feedback over the first six months of a new client relationship to ensure all expectations are met. It is also identifying and measuring key data points to pinpoint areas for further service improvements.



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 Mary Bonsor, GC relationship director, Mishcon de Reya

programme lead Camilla D'Arcy and global head of clients and sectors Lauren Bridgen. "The ability to provide a unified client experience regardless of geography has become a key differentiator," says D'Arcy.

Leaders also see higher expectations around the speed of delivering such high-quality service. In today's digital landscape, where tech enables us to converse and carry out tasks faster, any delays in communication or completing straightforward steps that can be sped up with tech may ruffle clients' feathers.

Amasis Saba, business acceptance director at Simmons & Simmons, says: "Clients don't expect Amazon-style turnarounds — at least not for everything — but there's clear demand for faster response and delivery in some areas. For example, many expect onboarding to be carried out in a matter of days."

Bridgen, Evan Morgan, head of bids and client innovation at DAC Beachcroft, and Mary Bonsor, GC relationship director at Mishcon de Reya, all agree, adding that the expectation of higher speed is particularly prominent when it comes to communication, given the multitude of instant messaging tools available globally.

"If early queries aren't answered promptly or updates are infrequent, clients may feel deprioritised and escalate concerns to senior stakeholders. Moreover, when a law firm fails to adapt to a client's preferred communication style, frequency or format — or escalates issues too late — it can create anxiety, reduce trust, and even force the client to 'manage the law firm' themselves," adds Bridgen.

However, Bonsor highlights that speed is not everything, especially with delivery. "There's a difference between being responsive and completing a matter quickly — which is not possible for some areas of law, like litigation. Some things need time and attention, but if a client emails you with an urgent problem, a swift reply to let them know you've acknowledged their request is key. You need to understand and manage their expectations carefully."

Given the highly unstable geopolitical and economic landscape, clients also value certainty more than ever. As such, they're demanding greater transparency and fee predictability to avoid any 'surprise' expenses — particularly as they scrutinise bills more intensely owing to cost pressures, note Bonsor and Morgan.

"In-house teams understand there may be extra fees beyond the initial quote should unforeseen circumstances emerge, but they want to be informed of such changes when they happen, rather than get blindsided at the end — which just shows a lack of transparency and poor client management," explains Bonsor.

**Where do the problems lie?**

As market competition intensifies and these expectations have risen to an all-time high, the ability to deliver a seamless client experience can make a huge difference to winning work. While the specific pain points or areas of improvement will differ from firm to firm, there are certain stages where firms often experience difficulties, note experts.

Andy Moorcroft, senior business development

and client services lead at Stevens & Bolton, believes that the initial stage of winning a new client is often the biggest hill for a firm to climb. "Law firms are selling an intangible service, so the client doesn't get to see the 'product' until the matter begins. This dynamic is based on the buyer's trust that you can deliver what you promise. The challenge therefore is instilling the client with sufficient confidence to make them want to appoint you for a particular workstream — and that heavily relies on how law firms approach and manage the pitching process.

"Another potential pinch point is at the other end of the client journey — maintaining the relationship with the client after the initial matter is completed. Where firms can struggle is further developing that bond and opening avenues for repeat business or cross-selling opportunities," he adds.

These frictions signal a limited understanding of what the client wants or needs — often stemming from insufficient investment in business development training and cross-border collaboration, and inconsistencies in collecting and recording client data and preferences, note D'Arcy and Morgan.

Active listening is an area where more work is needed, adds Bonsor. "In the

**WHAT ARE FIRMS DOING TO IMPROVE THE CLIENT EXPERIENCE?**

**Stevens & Bolton — Structured BD training for partners**

In recent years, Stevens & Bolton has been mapping out and reviewing the entire matter handling process to have full visibility of the client experience at every stage and identify areas where it could add more value.

Moreover, in July 2025 the firm implemented a new 'Client Catalyst' programme. This was a six-month, multi-stage training initiative designed to hone partners' BD skills, and instill more confidence to be able to offer GCs a premium service, nurture stronger client relationships long term, and build the foundation for repeat or cross-selling business without putting off clients.

The programme offered a blend of in-person and virtual workshops, as well as one-to-one coaching sessions, delivered to all firm partners over several sessions. The partners were split into several cohorts from different practice areas, to showcase different perspectives and allow the partners to learn from one another.

"We didn't want this to be a one-off BD 'sheep-dip' where everything gets forgotten after a few days, as partners get back to their busy schedules. We wanted to have a drumbeat of activity over a longer period to ensure all the valuable lessons stick," explains Cleveland.

"We also wanted this to go beyond theoretical teaching. As part of the programme, each partner was required to take the learnings and use them in real-life scenarios with their networks, then report back on progress at each session."

**Mishcon de Reya — In-house academy for all**

Mishcon de Reya is carrying out regular client listening initiatives, and internal training sessions to help people further develop their technical, client-centric and softer skills — with the most recent being an AI literacy programme due to be delivered this year.

Bonsor's role of GC relationship director is one of the latest examples of how the firm is raising the bar to elevate the client experience — as this is a new position specifically created to get better feedback from GCs and support time-poor fee earners with their BD activities.

Moreover, the firm launched its new GC Academy in January 2025 to equip in-house teams with valuable tools and practical skills to help them succeed in their roles. The development programme offers four set modules on financial literacy, legal operations, legal technology for strategic impact, and leadership, which are delivered by Mishcon de Reya's legal faculty, executive coaches, experienced GCs and other industry experts over the course of four months.

This programme is open to any GC — regardless of whether they work with Mishcon de Reya — with each cohort comprising 25 in-house lawyers.

"The feedback so far has been amazing. We carry out regular surveys after each module, and most who have taken these courses have scored them very highly across the board — and we've even seen some GCs become our clients on the back of this," says Bonsor.

### Simmons & Simmons — business acceptance for change

Simmons & Simmons redesigned its onboarding process over 18 months to improve efficiency and deliver a smoother client journey.

"This was not a business acceptance or IT team-led project, it was a firm-wide one, which is why we involved people from finance, marketing and BD, tech, and risk and compliance in this process," emphasises Saba. "This gave us the certainty that the new onboarding process addressed any friction that could occur at any point of the matter from the outset."

This transformation was underpinned by several key changes. One was the move to an AI-powered platform for client obligation management to replace its previous manual-heavy process. Another was the redistribution of responsibility for carrying out KYC due diligence and clearing checks and conflicts from the fee earners to Saba's business acceptance division.

The division is also using AI to carry out enhanced searches, which Saba says has helped to find client information faster and easier.

He adds: "We also moved business acceptance out of the GC and risk function — where it normally sits in a law firm — into the operations one. In our report to the COO, which means it's easier

for us to make changes if needed."

The new process has already yielded significant improvements, with the firm now consistently opening matters and clearing conflicts in two days — where it previously took around two weeks. "We're not stopping there; our aim is to cut that down even further to 24 hours," says Saba.

"We're also working on speeding up client due diligence from the current two weeks to between three and seven days, but that will depend on how quickly the client provides the necessary information."

### DAC Beachcroft — Onboarding feedback process and client data analysis

To complement its existing client-listening programme, DAC Beachcroft has also introduced a new onboarding feedback process.

The new mechanism starts with confirming the client's needs and expectations regarding all operational aspects of service delivery — from establishing preferred communication channels and delivery timeframes, to confirming pricing and billing methods, explain Rebecca Richter, the firm's deputy director for clients and markets.

In addition, throughout the first six months, the firm regularly collates feedback on a number of

key areas — including whether it has the right mix of people working on a particular matter, how efficiently and frequently it provides updates and insights to the client, and if there are other areas where it can provide a better service — to ensure all expectations established from the outset are met, and if not, adjust the service delivery. This feedback is conducted in different languages to enable global clients to express themselves more freely and accurately, and take into account cultural nuances.

DAC Beachcroft is also taking a very data-led approach to service delivery. Part of its overall client experience mapping also involves identifying all the data points captured throughout the end-to-end matter journey. This information is then analysed to pinpoint areas for further service improvements, or deliver additional insight and advice.

Morgan says: "In employment law, for example, one area we'd look at is the number of matters completed for a client over a specific period, to gauge any recurring themes or issues. We'd then present these insights to the client, and see if there is anything we can help them with to address these issues. That builds trust and strengthens the relationship further, and allows us to deliver more value in a proactive way." ▴

"Law firms are selling an intangible service, so the client doesn't see the 'product' until the matter is completed. The challenge is instilling the client with confidence from the outset to win that work — that relies on how lawyers approach and pitch to them."

Andy Moorcroft, senior business development and client services lead at Stevens & Bolton

desire to offer client greater value and meet billable-hour targets, lawyers often jump the gun and focus too much on how they can solve the problem, and not enough on listening to the client and asking questions to identify the problem. Firms need to equip their lawyers with the right skills to listen to their clients and act accordingly." Experts emphasise that this active listening must be applied throughout the progression of a matter, not solely at the start or end of the journey.

According to Bonsor and Bridgen, billing can also be a pain point for some, particularly if multiple tech systems are used or fee tracking is inconsistent. "Unexpected costs, lack of clarity, or misalignment with panel terms can quickly erode confidence and make the firm seem administratively burdensome," says Bridgen.

Perhaps the biggest gaps in creating a holistic client experience, however, stems from siloed working and inconsistent standards across jurisdictions and teams, says Bridgen. "A lack of coordination can lead to differing communication styles, responsiveness and process familiarity, and thus an inconsistent service, which can undermine trust and value. This is why operating as one firm globally while remaining sensitive to local culture and market nuance is so important," she adds — a view echoed by Rachel Montgomery, clients and markets director at DAC Beachcroft.

### Eye on the prize, not the tech

Given the heightened market competition, a smooth and efficient end-to-end journey will likely remain a key differentiator in the client's eyes. However, these leaders are clear that this is not a one-and-done project, but something that requires ongoing attention.

"The other mistake I've seen people make is thinking that technology is the magic bullet and forgetting about everything else, like data strategy, governance and admin tasks. These might look dull in comparison, but they are key elements that can make or break the client experience," adds Jo Cooper, global head of marketing and BD operations at Simmons & Simmons.

Above all, optimising the client experience requires cross-functional collaboration to avoid wasting time and resources on narrow, isolated problems, and instead focus on key improvements that will deliver greater impact throughout the journey, and present a cohesive brand and service each time — one that has the client at the core. "The guiding principle needs to be 'what does good look like for the client?' and then work backwards from there," concludes Morgan. ▴