

The Problem of Pain

Will partners accept sacrifices as the price of change? Law firms' futures depend on the answer.

by [Jordan Furlong, Edge International](#)

Law firms have a problem: growth is at a standstill or shrinking, reducing lawyers' income and compromising partners' profits. Many firms believe they have a solution: slash costs and inject revenue. They fire secretaries, cut back on associates, de-equitize low-income partners, and acquire high-income partners, all to maintain or increase profit.

These are short-term fixes, unsustainable by definition: you can only fire people once, and there are only so many lateral hires. But there's a much bigger problem here, the one that will eventually bring these firms down from the inside.

The problem is this: *partners are refusing to absorb any pain.*

The changing legal market is inflicting damage on law firms unable or unwilling to adapt to a different environment -- that's what is hurting growth. But the owners of these firms are shielding themselves from the suffering, redirecting it to the vulnerable today or cutting short-term deals that could hamstring their successors tomorrow.

Owners who sacrifice others while making little or no sacrifice themselves send a clear message throughout the enterprise: "You are a means to our ends. You are temporary and expendable. We matter more than you." Maybe this befits some markets and industries. But it is unprofessional and unbecoming of lawyers to behave like this.

True leaders, conversely, will step up and deliver to their colleagues this message:

"We must share the pain if we want to have any hope of turning our firm around. We will have to change what we offer the market, how we deliver it, how we price it, and how we pay people to provide it. Doing this will cause great upheaval, damaging our profits in the short and maybe the medium term. But if we accept the pain of change today, we will reap the profits, the praise, and the performance tomorrow."

This is a hard message, with a stark choice: "Stay with us, perhaps make less money for an indefinite period, share the pain today — but earn the rewards tomorrow,

build a great and resilient modern law firm, a legacy of professionalism and stewardship. Or leave — go to another firm and continue to make others pay the price of change." Who will deliver this message? Who will act on it?

The most pressing problem with law firms right now is whether partners will make personal sacrifices to help their firms transition to the future — or whether they'll drive their firms into the ground to get themselves a few extra miles down the road. This is the fundamental question facing law firms — a question of leadership, professionalism and courage. How will you answer it?

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