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The mentor option

Sir – Wilf Altman (*Accountancy*, July, p136) notes that ‘leading firms of accountants are surprisingly coy about coaching’.

In my experience, however, all of the largest firms run partner development programmes and most of these include a form of coaching or mentoring. I agree with Altman that there is no single definition of ‘coaching’ in the context of ‘the new religion’. Many accountants have heard of life coaching, business coaching or success coaching. We have probably also heard of mentoring – typically where a suitably senior person shares their experience and their wider knowledge of the profession to speed up the development of a less experienced person.

What the process is called, however, is less important than whether prospective partners and rising stars are motivated to enhance their skills. Most firms tend to rely on senior partners to act as coaches or mentors. In practice such partners rarely have the training, talent or time to be reliably effective in such roles. The candidates cannot complain for fear of damaging their potential for progression and upsetting the senior partner. The firms imply that the best candidates would take that chance but few people have the confidence that requires.

Increasingly, therefore, ambitious firms are engaging experienced credible mentors from outside the firm. Mentors such as myself are not subject to conflicting time constraints or political manoeuvrings within the firm. We are there for the candidates when required and can provide a tailored programme that includes coaching in those, generally non-technical,

skills that the candidate needs to develop further.

Most firms that are not large enough to run their own internal partner development programmes are increasingly looking to find cost-effective alternatives. They want to ensure that their rising stars stay and develop the key business skills they require to be effective and profitable as partners. Some firms may describe this as ‘coaching’. Others will see this as mentoring – which is possibly more relevant for all but the really experienced partners. Offering new recruits the (tax-free) benefit of a credible mentor can also assist the recruitment process during the ongoing ‘war for talent’.

Mark Lee FCA CTA (Fellow) MMC

The law is an ass

Sir – I would like to thank one of my successful candidates Sir Robert Ropner for his very kind letter entitled ‘Better with age’ in your July issue (p23). As an experienced chartered accountant and businessman I experienced ageism in the workplace when I reached 50 and decided to fight back. The result is www.matureaccountants.com, an online recruitment service that I set up last year and which is slowly overtaking my life.

The response and interest I have received has been quite overwhelming (see the feedback on the site) and I now have a database of hundreds of very experienced candidates many of whom are struggling to find work despite the alleged shortage of qualified accountants in the UK.

The fact is that many employers have focused on the newly qualified Big Four end of the market where supply and demand are still out of

Mature accountants: Many are struggling to find work



balance, but I have now seen at first hand the range and depth of candidates that are available, many of whom are desperate for work. And this is at a time when the government requires us to work longer to plug the gap in the pensions black-hole that has been created through years of mismanagement by all concerned.

However, you may be interested to know that an employment lawyer has now advised me that under the new Age Discrimination Act that becomes law this October, I could be accused of discriminating against younger people because I use the word ‘mature’ and that I should not specify years of experience.

As our strap line is Experience + Expertise = Better Value, I guess I will be in the courts by the end of the year – total madness!

Martin Lloyd-Penny FCA

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