

O with the flow

📅 22 September 2023 👤 Claire Stripp

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Ahead of Briefing Knowledge Leaders 2023 in October, Richard Brent chats to co-chair Claire Stripp, head of talent and knowledge at Browne Jacobson and O Shaped board member helping to spread the ‘O Shaped’ movement that has nothing short of legacy legal mindset transformation in its sights.

Legal’s ‘O Shaped’ movement started when founder Dan Kayne decided it was time to take the opportunity to see the lawyers in his then organisation — Network Rail — from the perspective of a different department. He was seconded to work in the commercial function for a year, and in doing so witnessed a troubling disconnect — highly talented lawyers were not on the same page as other stakeholders about strategic priorities and how to make progress.

It’s often said law firms risk running things in silos — but Kayne saw there was something else going on at a human level to tackle. Returning to the legal team, he made a point of pushing it to engage and empathise with the concerns of other colleagues more proactively — however, he continued to encounter lawyers who limited their role to technical law and didn’t consider the impact they could have more broadly on helping the business to achieve its objectives.

Perhaps it was a matter of education and training, perhaps legal culture, but for everyone’s benefit Kayne was determined to see significantly more emphasis on building lawyers of the future as more ‘well-rounded’ professional people. So-called O Shaped legal teams would be encouraged to be more original and open in approach (in several respects), including identifying and taking opportunities, and the necessary ownership, with optimism (these are known as the ‘five Os’).

O Shaped came out with an initial report in 2020, just before the pandemic struck — and the idea of doing business as ‘people-first’ clearly hit home extra hard in the extraordinary circumstances of lockdown. Collaboration, sensitivity, flexibility and resilience were suddenly in demand like never before. Some law schools have since adopted O Shaped into their curriculum — and firms are also coming forward to accept and embrace the idea that a lasting, widespread change of culture needs committed action and leadership.

Partners in progress

In May 2022, Browne Jacobson was the very first law firm to sign up to O shaped as an official partner. In so doing, it proactively considers the five Os mindset both internally and, of course, in its approach to clients. As an O Shaped partner it also — shares what emerges in terms of best practice, and takes part in any pilots.

Head of talent and knowledge Claire Stripp is on the O Shaped ‘steering board’. “Entering our second year, this has now clearly become embedded as part of the firm’s language — I’ll hear ‘that’s a very O thing to do’, or ‘we could definitely be more O Shaped there’,” she says. “We’re also weaving the attributes throughout, such as in our learning and development programmes.”

Taking the idea of being ‘open’ as an example: “That’s a characteristic you can apply to having a growth mindset, to being open to feedback and to being open with clients.

“There’s an element that the recruitment team have already embedded in the application process — so, I’ve seen new joiners who know the five Os from the outset. And as the voice of the client is key, O Shaped is a regular presence at our own in-house events.”

Training together

But although shaking up the outlook/approach of lawyers was the original cause, it's significant that Kayne's group is no longer called the 'O Shaped Lawyer' — recognition that this should be able to influence process improvement and a more positive working life for all the profession's people.

"One particularly happy benefit is that colleagues from different departments have more opportunity to sit around the table with peers from clients and the O Shaped in-house legal community, discussing what matters to them," explains Stripp. Perhaps they're reimagining how the pitch process for a more O Shaped engagement would look — or how in-house and private practice really can create value for their mutual clients.

She's particularly proud of both the name and ethos behind a new training programme that has been set up at Browne Jacobson — Advance to O: "It's designed with developing psychological safety — core to O Shaped — as one intended outcome, and an example is how this is specifically open to mixed groups from right across the firm — all levels, all business roles," she says. "We absolutely want the PA sharing space and perspective with the equity partner; marketing and technology experts coming together to learn with associates and trainees."

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She adds that Browne Jacobson works for an approximate 50/50 split of private and public sector — so is accustomed to standing in a wide range of different clients' shoes when it comes to successful outcomes.

"Whether it's a colleague needing some support for a presentation, or a local authority with a serious issue, O Shaped attributes are also important when thinking about client centricity in line with our core values of collaboration, inclusion and pragmatism."

What next for knowledge?

This last idea has a strong tie to the knowledge management space, too — the size of the opportunity for people from right across the firm to focus and create value beyond any matter in hand today.

"We have to persuade and empower people to lift their heads up and appreciate client journeys more holistically," explains Stripp. "For example, a very long-term knowledge challenge is the business of leading lawyers to appreciate the extent of their knowledge beyond the law — such as important points of process or changing context."

But perhaps fast-changing technology — like large language models — might just be about ready to meet the O Shaped mindset somewhere in the middle to make that happen more easily.

"I think that the knowledge magic of the future won't be in the capture — information and experience is increasingly explicit as data, and it's everywhere," she says. "The differentiator will be how well a firm's people seek it out and manage to make it more usable, including by effectively augmenting with what others know."

Stripp is also an accredited facilitator of Heidi Gardner's model of 'smart collaboration' (covered in **Briefing** before — see [here](#)). This is based on the idea that a world with increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) problems to solve needs the deliberate assembly of diverse expertise or perspectives to prioritise issues and respond appropriately. Even one of the most talented experts on a subject won't be enough in isolation.

And does this have implications not only for how knowledge assets and teams are managed, but perhaps also how the knowledge management function itself is structured?

"The practice development lawyer, or similar role — a senior internal counsel for their field, ensuring quality and consistency — absolutely remains important in an increasingly VUCA legal environment," says Stripp.

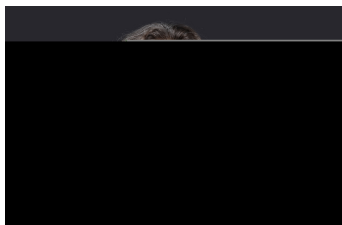
"But as with HR or finance, firms might now also start to see value in knowledge 'business partners' — a role and responsibility to take our methodologies and mindset from the centre out to interface with the legal teams and bring their experience back in."

What it means to be O Shaped

- The 12 O Shaped attributes set out in 2019 — after interviews with 18 senior in-house leaders across the UK — are:

- Building relationships: Emotional intelligence; trust and influence; communication; collaboration
- Creating value: Problem solving; identifying opportunities; synthesis; simplifying complexity
- Being adaptable: Courage; feedback; resilience; continuous learnings to be

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