

## Managing Associates at Hammill Heslop

### *The Dilemma*

Anna Mather was frustrated. It was her second year post qualification as a junior associate in the Finance team at Hammill Heslop, a large international law firm based in London. "Is it too early to quit?" she wondered to herself. When she had started as a trainee at the firm – a prestigious name with a reputation for working everyone hard – she had told herself she would endure the training period and then give it a further two years as an associate in her chosen practice area to see whether she liked it. The two years were nearly up. She thought back to the first six months following qualification, when the long hours seemed glamorous and she actually took a kind of perverse pleasure in cancelling plans with her friends because she was working on a big deal – she couldn't say what it was but they would see it in the newspapers soon. Now the invitations were fewer and she wished she could accept more of them.

Anna had been one of the top law students at her university and had many offers at graduation – management consultancies, investment banks and the public service.

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This case was prepared by Varun Ghosh, assisted by Tim Bellis, Fellow in Management Practice, Cambridge Judge Business School. The firm of Hammill Heslop and the characters featured in the case are completely fictional. Any resemblance to any person is purely coincidental and no similarity to any person is intended or should be inferred.

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Anna had chosen Hammill Heslop because she liked the law and wanted to qualify as a solicitor. Also, in the last few years of her studies, several of the best law students from her university had taken up offers from Hammill Heslop. That was important. To be the best, you have to work with top people. She also wanted corporate experience, to get into the marrow of the way companies did deals. When she joined Hammill Heslop, Anna had expected the long hours and even looked forward to them. But the experience was somehow less rewarding that she had anticipated.

Anna was working on market leading deals. At a broader level, they were fascinating, but cross-reference checking, due diligence and drafting closing memos – the work she actually did on a day-to-day basis – was not. That was okay, she was paying her dues and most of her fellow associates were great to work with.

Over time, however, the relentlessness of the normal patterns of work was demoralizing. There was an endless stream of deals with little recovery time between them and nothing by way of celebration or real acknowledgement of the effort involved. Anna knew she was getting better at her job but the value of that improvement was not clear.

The Finance team had a great reputation in the market but was not always a pleasant place. Good work was taken for granted and mistakes were not easily forgotten. Anna remembered the afternoon, after a fortnight of late nights, when the partner on the deal has asked her to bring ‘that advice’ into his office. She had been working on three advices and brought the wrong one. The advice was thrown back across the table. She had nearly cried.

Anna also remembered being on the receiving end of a tongue lashing from a partner in one of the other teams she had asked to work across the Easter weekend. When

Anna's partner had changed the deadline, it was Anna who had to tell the IP partner at midnight on Saturday that they had an extra week. He did not take it well.

There were also good partners to work for – those who were not irritated by questions and actually seemed to know what junior associates could handle on their own. On those deals, there was only the voluminous, challenging work with short deadlines to worry about. Those were the partners that said 'thank you'. Working for them felt like you were getting things done – a sense of achievement. If only there were more of them.

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Anna got back to work. The deal she was on looked set to close next week and it could not happen quickly enough. The last two months had felt like she was working the night and the weekend shifts. Tasks would come in after 7pm most evenings with work product expected by the next morning but, after getting through the early morning conference calls, she sat at her desk for most of the day with very little to do and limited or no insight into what was happening on the deal. Friday afternoons brought the big assignments with work product usually required Monday or Tuesday.

Further declining fitness, evaporating social life and that creeping tiredness were testament to the lifestyle on this deal – and all without the billable hours to show for it. Anna laughed a little to herself. It seemed vaguely ridiculous but she would have felt better if her billable time reflected what the last couple of months felt like.

It was a Friday afternoon and the phone rang in Anna's office. It was Rebecca Simpson, the administrative partner in the finance team. Here we go again, thought Anna. More work!

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Rebecca Simpson wished she had more time. Being the administrative partner was a chalice she would very happily pass on in a year. Rebecca had just spoken to Dean Marsh, a director at Tourmalet Bank. After a relatively quiet summer, October might be a very busy month. There were more than 20 anticipated sets of commitment letters in the pipeline. Depending on how many of these letters graduated into full deals, the team might be stretched thin in the months ahead.

Her mind turned to staffing. Rebecca quickly reviewed the current holiday schedules for the team. Anna Mather had put in for leave from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> of October. The leave had been approved a few months ago when things were quieter. Now it was looking like very bad timing indeed. Though Rebecca had never worked with Anna, she was regarded as a talented, promising young woman, and Rebecca wanted to see her succeed at Hammill Heslop.

It would not be good for Anna to be out during the first truly busy period in the year. The timing meant she would not be able to be staffed on deal teams and would miss out on important experience. One of the problems for the team was the volatility of the market since the global financial crisis. Many of the junior associates were only getting patchy experience on deals and often only on the early parts of transactions because so many did not run the full distance to closing. There were other things to consider. Junior associate holidays were not a high priority in the firm. There might be

a perception issue among the senior associates and partners if it was 'all hands on deck' and Anna was not around. But it was also possible that the expected work would not materialize.

This was already taking too long, thought Rebecca. There were three clear options on how to deal with this. The first, cancel Anna's leave, after explaining the situation. The second was to let Anna take her holiday. It might put the team under some additional pressure but it would not be disastrous. The third was to discuss the situation with her but leave the ultimate decision to her.

#### *Questions*

- *Which of these options is the most suitable?*
- *What environmental factors make this decision more difficult?*
- *Are there alternative options?*
- *What changes to firm procedures would you advise for HH to consider implementing for the future?*

#### ***Managing an Associate***

Rebecca went into conference calls for most of Friday morning. On reflection, Rebecca did not want to just cancel Anna's leave. Rebecca had to cancel many of her own holidays when she was a young associate but she recalled the session at the last partner retreat on managing Generation Y employees. That was not the way they were supposed to do things any more. Junior associates, they had been told, wanted greater autonomy and to be brought into the decision making process. It didn't seem fair to Anna to let her take the leave without letting her know of the potential career drawbacks and it would not reflect well on either of them if Anna was on holiday

during the busiest time of the year. She would have talk to Anna and try to guide her but leave the ultimate decision up to her.

“Anna, I noticed you’ve got some leave booked in a couple of weeks. You’re out for a wedding?”

“Yes. It’s just for a week.”

“Well, it’s probably going to be a pretty busy time for us in October and I wanted to have a chat about it all. I’m not saying not to take the leave. You’re an adult and a professional and you can make these calls yourself but I want you to think about what you want out of this job and about your professional development. What you want to achieve here.”

“Okay.”

“I mean, why are you taking leave?”

“A cousin’s wedding. Do you want me to cancel the holiday?”

“I’m not saying that. Breaks are important. I’m just concerned that you’ll be out when things are busy and there might be a perception issue as well. People will walk past your office that week and think, ‘Oh, Anna’s out’ – and it won’t look great. I’m not saying you’ll get fired or anything – it’s just a perception issue.

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Ultimately, it’s up to you. I mean, when I was coming up, I really didn’t make it to a lot of weddings or family events. I just wanted to work. I know things are different now, but if you want to do this, then from your perspective you need to think about ways to make up for it. I don’t know how busy you’ve been but the reality is you can always work harder. Also think about whether you need a whole week or whether you can get there and back in a couple of days. Anyway, why don’t you take the weekend, have a think about it and we can chat again on Monday.”

“Thanks, Rebecca.”

“Thank you, Anna.”

*Questions*

*Do you think Rebecca effectively delivered the message she set out to?*

*What do you think were the messages Anna received?*

*How would you better deliver the message?*

***Associate Reaction***

Anna walked out of Rebecca’s office. She was upset and more than a little angry. This was the first interest Rebecca or any of the partners had really taken in her ‘professional development’ in a year and a half and it was to cancel her holiday. And she would have to cancel it – after that meeting. If it hadn’t been approved initially, it wouldn’t have been a problem. But the break in October had been her light at the end of the tunnel after the last few months. Now she would have to call her cousin to let her know she could not come to her wedding. Or just work harder? Rebecca hadn’t even looked at workload the last few months. She’d worked those nights and weekends when only a few other junior associates were in the office, but if she took some time off there would be perception issues. On Monday, Anna cancelled her October leave.

Six months later, she left Hammill Heslop.