

# FACULTY INSIGHTS

Q&A WITH ROBERT G. ECCLES



HARVARD  
BUSINESS  
SCHOOL

EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

## BUILDING AND MAINTAINING THE CLIENT RELATIONSHIP



For a professional service firm, cultivating long-lasting relationships depends as much on effective client interaction as on organizational structure and processes. Harvard Business School (HBS) professor Robert G. Eccles, faculty cochair of the [Building Client Management Capabilities in Professional Service Firms](#) program, explains how HBS helps firms drive growth through better client management.

### **Why is it particularly challenging—and important—for professional service firms to be more adept at managing client relationships?**

Compared with other types of organizations, professional service firms are distinctive in that the interface with their clients is significant—and all senior people have client management responsibilities. At the same time, a small number of clients account for a large proportion of the revenue for many professional service firms. As a result, the firm's relationships with its clients are its lifeblood, and building and maintaining those relationships are critically important activities.

Solid client relationships do much more than drive revenue in the short term. The strength of the relationships, for example, contributes to the firm's brand. For many companies, clients are also a key source of innovation, generating ideas for new products and services.

### **HBS offers two programs for professional service firms. How do they differ?**

The first, [Leading Professional Service Firms](#), focuses on the internal aspects of managing the company—what we call the “talent market.” We help companies operate more effectively by putting the right people in place, aligning the organization, providing the right incentives to drive their strategy forward, and so on. The second program, [Building Client Management Capabilities in Professional Service Firms](#), puts the spotlight on the client market and addresses one central question: How can a professional service firm be most successful in managing its key client relationships?

### **How does Building Client Management Capabilities in Professional Service Firms help companies strengthen those relationships?**

The program's curriculum is designed to help executives build the skills, attitudes, and capabilities within themselves and within their firms that will improve their effectiveness in developing and sustaining client relationships. We explore the two components of client management—the interactions with the client and the activities undertaken within the organization to nurture those relationships. At the macro level, we examine what kinds of structures, systems, and processes a professional service firm needs to best serve its most important clients. At the micro level, we explore the processes, approaches, and tactics required to manage *individual* client relationships.

For complete information, program updates, and an online application, visit:

[www.exed.hbs.edu/programs/bcmc/](http://www.exed.hbs.edu/programs/bcmc/)



### **What skills are essential to building effective client management?**

Many different skills need to come together—and we help participants integrate and balance those skills. For example, people who are managing client relationships must have good strategies for understanding the client's business and the client's needs. They must clearly understand the firm's capabilities, and be able to match the client's needs with those internal capabilities. These individuals may not have much authority, so their leadership approach needs to be tailored to their situation. They must be able to build teams internally as well as negotiate—both internally and with clients.

### **What are the key takeaways of Building Client Management Capabilities in Professional Service Firms?**

This program helps firms become more effective in taking advantage of opportunities. Every professional service firm today has more opportunity in the client market than it has capable client relationship managers to serve that market. By building the capabilities of the partners responsible for managing the firm's key client relationships, the company will be much better equipped to fulfill its potential.

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