

A New Approach to Collaboration: Legal Project Management

Posted At the Intersection by Pamela Woldow



Given the hard-nosed economic realities of the legal profession, it strikes many lawyers as a little touchy-feely, and even a bit naïve, to speak of “partnerships” between law firms and their clients. Although the parties share a need and appreciation for high-quality legal work, law is basically a vendor-

purchaser relationship where one side’s desire to limit costs and the other side’s money-making objectives create interactions that often are misaligned and at times adversarial.

However, the titanic cost pressures on law firms and legal departments alike certainly reward new types of *collaborations*, even if they can’t accurately be described as partnerships. In today’s new reality, the driving force is efficiency and its sidekicks: predictability, communication and risk reduction.

Right now, that force frequently manifests on a do-it-yourself basis, expressed in unilateral client initiatives:

- ▶ RFPs demanding legal project management (LPM) capabilities from their firms
- ▶ delegating RFP administration to procurement departments
- ▶ declining to pay for first (second and even third!) year associate time
- ▶ using internal analysts to scrutinize law firm bills
- ▶ demanding that firms adopt their billing or task codes.

For their part, firms may take their own steps to improve performance and efficiency, perhaps by reorganizing their practice groups into client teams, implementing razzle-dazzle new LPM software tools, conducting upward review of their partners' supervisory capabilities, or implementing competency-based performance evaluation of associates.

Writing recently, in the *Wall Street Journal*, Vanessa O'Connell noted another unilateral sea change: some law departments' are hiring their baby lawyers directly from law school and training them themselves, rather than recruiting older lawyers with law firm experience.

Hewlett-Packard's GC, Michael Holston, calls this self-help approach "the wave of the future." Pfizer GC Amy Shulman couches the trend in terms of the buyer's perspective: **"We need to train a new generation of lawyers who know how to respond to what clients need."**

We urge an alternative take on this either-we-do-it-or-they-do-it orientation. In our LPM training, we see better results when we focus more on client teams and build training content around the actual roles and responsibilities of the "intact team," rather than training large groups of lawyers from diverse practice groups. We have seen even greater and more immediate benefits when we *include lawyers from the client side in the training* – not just to watch, but to build their needs, structure and internal procedures into the fabric of the training. The emphasis on technique more than theory and this practical focus plays well with all stakeholders.

We see no reason why these collaborative benefits – for both sides – cannot readily be extended to the orientation and training of the lawyers who serve certain important clients, regardless of whether they're employed by the firm or are in-house lawyers. Already we are seeing more client demands in RFPs for the secondment of several associates to reside for awhile within the client's walls (at no cost to the client, of course).

To extend this idea, we see a powerful incentive for what might be call "Bridged Professional Development," that is, on training initiatives that are tied to real matters being handled by real client-law firm teams in real life. Such initiatives

would provide a powerful lever for the firm and the client to collaborate on defining service deliverables, phases, tasks, roles and communication.

From the client's perspective, only a few "crème de la crème" lawyers provide this sort of professional development collaboration right now, but it sure makes sense for more to advance this idea to their clients. Being recognized for pragmatic innovation requires giant strides, not baby steps. It's not enough to try to be just a little better than one's competitors.

So, be the first on your block to rise above the herd, to get practical, to get real. Robin Williams once put it perfectly: "Reality. Wow, what a concept."

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