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Dechert Puts Its Attorneys Through Project Management Training

Editor's note: This is the first in an occasional series examining how individual firms implement project/process management techniques to make lawyers more efficient.

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Of the Legal Staff

The co-chairman of Dechert's real estate finance practice was admittedly skeptical walking into one of the many project management training sessions going on across the firm's offices over the last six months. After all, the deals San Francisco-based Joseph B. Heil works on are too varied and complex to be broken down into simple tasks, right?

"We work on small, medium and large projects, some litigation, some transactional, some we answer questions," Heil said. "It's not one size fits all. We have projects and we're going to have somebody else teach us to manage our projects? I think for the training to be effective it would have to cover all [types of] projects. I thought that was not possible."

Altman Weil's Pamela Woldow was prepared for that reaction.

Woldow was contacted by Dechert after she gave a speech on legal project management, and the discussions resulted in the firm bringing her on board for a firmwide project to train every partner and associate on how to more efficiently deliver legal services.

The push for efficiency among large law firms has largely been driven by cost concerns from clients and the need to make good on the alternative fee arrangements that are often seen as a solution to these cost concerns.

Woldow said project management works for deals done on hourly rates or alternative arrangements. She said she would feel more comfortable if her law firm used it on hourly rate projects to ensure she was getting value under the system.

"But from a law firm perspective, this type of process is enormously effective when operating on an alternative fee arrangement because, if they are going to be profitable, they cannot operate the way they have in the past," she said.

At Dechert, the training was broken down into two phases, with partner training starting last October and concluding recently. The associates will now go through their training. Woldow said she has done similar training for certain practice groups at other firms, but said she doesn't know of any other firm that has done something similar across all offices and attorney levels.

Woldow's practice at Altman Weil focuses on advising law departments, which she said is the appeal for a law firm looking to get training on an issue clients are often demanding be incorporated into their matters.

"I do spend most of my time with GCs and in-house counsel and the message beyond the recession is that they want their



law firms to operate more like businesses and deliver their services more efficiently and cost effectively," she said.

The training sessions for partners included no more than 20 partners at a time, from varied practice groups. They were brought in for four- to six-hour sessions and taught the concepts of project management and tools to implement it. Lawyers visually mapped out matters related to their practice to see how the process works.

The training breaks down a matter from the earliest stages of assignment to the end, with an emphasis on a lot of up-front communication with the client about expectations and defining the scope of the project.

"I think lawyers like to believe that everything they do is unique and complex and the truth is there are some parts of representation that are complex, but there is an awful lot that is rather easily mapped," Woldow said.

While litigators often get the blame for being the most averse to using project management because cases can take unexpected turns, Woldow said finance attorneys, though "battle wounded" in the

recession, have been the most resistant to the training.

Case in point: Heil, who by the end of the training said he was “pretty impressed.” He said the core of the training was getting lawyers to focus on what they are doing, why they are doing it and why they are doing it in a specific way or order.

“I thought it was terrific to have the partners in the firm being reminded of that,” Heil said. “They need to think about that in every thing they do.”

Heil, who is also managing partner of the San Francisco office, said he has held discussions about project management in office meetings and has worked to map out every matter that comes through the office. He said he now thinks it can be applied to every matter.

New York-based partner Andrew J. Levander wasn’t as tough to convince. His practice includes everything from white-collar criminal defense to complex litigation matters.

While certain matters may prove more challenging than others in terms of implementing project management techniques, he said there are enough clients out there demanding these types of services that firms have to embrace this.

Levander said he was surprised during the training to learn of different ways his colleagues across the firm had already been implementing project management skills. He also learned that while he thought he was a good communicator, attorneys can always stand to improve their communications skills with clients.

Though some clients may just need him to keep them out of jail no matter the cost or method, Levander said he is “convinced” that even the toughest of litigation matters can be done in more efficient ways. And when the goal is to create long-term relationships with clients, a trust will develop where both sides can revisit a deal when unexpected issues arise, he said.

“It’s a growing process,” Levander said. “The more you do it, the more comfortable you’ll be with it.”

Philadelphia-based Ben Barnett, who focuses his practice on life sciences, mass torts and products liability work, has used project management techniques for some time because of the nature of his client base.

While attorneys can’t predict what a judge or jury will do, they do know what it takes to get to the motion to dismiss or the motion for summary judgment stage, he said. Clients understand there is uncertainty in litigation, “but we still need a plan with as much certainty as you can provide,” Barnett said.

He said the training was really helpful in opening lawyers’ eyes to different methods of handling a matter.

“To see frankly smart people figure out different approaches to get to the same result was actually extremely useful,” he said.

Barnett said he is applying the methods now and recognizes each client is different. He said having a tool bag of options rather than one approach has

proven very useful. This is how clients have been running their business and adopting the methods gives law firms an opportunity to align themselves with their clients.

“This is not a fad,” Barnett said.

Training for associates will be less client-facing and business development-oriented than the partners’ sessions, Woldow said. It will likely be more granular and hands-on for the associates, she said.

Now that the partner training is complete, she said they will probably roll out project management techniques on an individual basis with their clients. Woldow said that while some of the Altman Weil consultants are trained in project management, they don’t see the need to use Six Sigma techniques in legal project management. She said lawyers don’t have the time or need for the rigidity of that type of process, but rather just need the general principles and understanding of how they can better deliver services. •

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