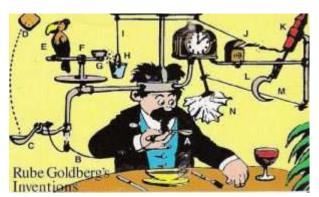# Legal Project Management Tools: Let Rube Goldberg Rest in Peace

By Pamela Woldow, Partner, Edge International

Asked how he likes his "next generation" automatic dishwasher, the disgruntled purchaser's voice drips with disdain: "Totally useless," he says. "I've had it a week now, and it hasn't even cleared the table yet."

I've heard similar responses from law firms that thought their Legal Project Management (LPM) implementation would be effortless if only they bought or built the right LPM software "tools." Some delegated their LPM software construction entirely to non-lawyer internal IT experts, who often modeled their software on sophisticated "industrial strength" project management methods, metrics and platforms. The results often were awesome in their sophistication, but dizzyingly complex.

Unsurprisingly, lawyer buy-in and use of these tools was limited largely to gearheads and first-adopters. Some lawyers worried that these "indispensable" components of LPM would usurp too much control, like the HAL 3000 computer in *2001 Space Odyssey.* Others worried that the new technology would demand too much time to learn and operate. Those internally-created software tools that survived have evolved through multiple iterations and have invariably become simpler and more user-friendly (and some I've seen recently using accessible dashboards, self-populating screens and cross-linked tabs keyed to LPM stages are flat-out fabulous).

Store-bought LPM software "solutions" developed by external vendors often are greeted with similar resistance – sometimes even more, because lawyers may not see "off-the-shelf" products as responsive to or tailored for their firm, practices or work habits. A lot of money has been spent by law firms installing vendor-sourced LPM software that sees little use and generates little enthusiasm among working lawyers.

My objective here is not to denigrate any home-grown or proprietary tool; it is to urge firms to rethink the way they approach tactical software decisions as part of their larger LPM strategy. Firms implementing LPM planning should keep a few fundamental common-sense considerations top-of-mind:

1. What is the firm's approach to LPM going to be? A sweeping firm wide full immersion rollout? A series of pilots to see where and how LPM will provide the greatest benefit? Confined to a few practice areas where clients demand it?

Incremental implementation to build an increasing groundswell of LPM acceptance and use? If implementation will take place selectively and over time, it's unwise to initially invest heavily in software with a lot of bells and whistles. Don't buy an elephant gun to shoot a squirrel.

2. Has the firm examined the capabilities of its existing time-and-billing and analytics software? I'll bet most firms use less than 20% of the capabilities of their existing software. Yet many either rush out to buy more, or work to reinvent the wheel just because it has the "LPM" phrase embossed on the sidewall. Most time and billing systems, for example, have phase and task code capabilities, and many also have enhanced budgeting capabilities. Many of a firm's present systems can readily be adapted to provide workable and cost-effective budgeting, analytics, actual-to-budget comparisons, and management support for lawyers handling service delivery and client relations.

3. You *must* involve lawyers in the design and configuration of tools that will be used by lawyers. If they find "their" tool to be cumbersome or daunting, they simply will not use it. If they feel it is being imposed upon them, especially by non-lawyers, they will buck and kick. Remember always that LPM really is a common-sense way of practicing law – and any tools employed to that end must be wielded by the people actually practicing the law.

4. Start simple. Remember the philosophical principle known as "Occam's Razor" which holds that, all other factors being equal, the simplest solution is usually the best. In practice, a hammer is likely to be a better tool than a 50-blade Swiss Army Knife. Develop your tools in collaboration with practice groups that want or need LPM so that the lawyer-IT staff interface is streamlined, and feedback on user-friendliness is immediate.

5. Grow your tools as your firm's LPM capabilities mature and don't box yourself in with tools that may soon be obsolete. Just as LPM best practices continue to evolve, their attendant tools *will* undergo constant improvement. Let your tools develop *in light of your lawyers' actual experience.* Software doesn't practice law; it should be used to support human beings practicing law. Moreover, *anything* that threatens too large or too fast a transformation will trigger intense resistance from your firm's lawyers.

You may remember Rube Goldberg, the cartoonist who invented elaborate, whimsical contraptions (often incorporating springs, fans, cannons and cats chasing mice on treadmills) to accomplish the simplest tasks. Your approach to sourcing, developing and implementing LPM software should not resemble a Rube Goldberg machine. Rube's goal was to make us laugh. Your goal should be to focus on tools that really work, wherever, whenever and however used.