

Legal Project Management: An Expanding Perspective

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The most significant news on the legal project management (LPM) front is that the thinking is evolving about the roles and responsibilities of the players. Until fairly recently, LPM was seen as a re-engineering of legal service delivery that took place primarily within the law firm. In other words, the firms promised their clients that better work process management and budgeting control would produce more efficient, predictable and cost-effective service. In this model, early-adopter law firms trained their lawyers to “do” LPM. The clients were beneficiaries, but not necessarily active co-participants; they just waited to see if the firms’ new tools, techniques and technology would pay off.

Our discussions and consulting with scores of General Counsel and in-house lawyers, however, highlight another priority that we think may – and should -- reshape LPM implementation. In-house folks tell us that in addition to introducing rational and consistent work processes, well-implemented LPM should be designed as a powerful *communication engine* – a bridge between law firm and client at all stages of an engagement – that keeps stakeholders in both camps in the loop, on the same page, and equally well-informed. They say that LPM must focus as much on how all the players *relate* as how they practice law.

For years client satisfaction surveys have described law firm-client communications as something of a train wreck. The main gripes were poor responsiveness (i.e., radio silence), lack of timely information (i.e., unpleasant surprises) and lack of transparency (i.e., a lot of stuff going on behind the blue curtain that the client didn’t/couldn’t see).

Very interesting things happened when:

- a) we encouraged law firms to include selected clients in their LPM planning, rollout and training; and
- b) we were engaged by legal departments to enhance their internal LPM efforts.

Clients pressed hard for better communication planning as a complement to LPM scoping, objective-setting, budgeting and monitoring functions. They suggested that legal services should move from a “we-they” allocation of responsibility to an “us” approach to tasks and responsibilities.

This collaborative relationship requires an intense focus on communication planning. It underscores the need to map and manage the complex interactions of diverse stakeholders with very different levels of responsibility, authority and accountability.

Lawyers tend to think communication is simple and straightforward, but it's really quite a Babel of voices, roles and interests. On the law firm side, you have relationship partners, responsible partners, billing partners, practice group leaders, partners from ancillary practice areas enlisted for their particular expertise, senior associates (one of whom often is a designated or *de facto* project manager), junior associates, paralegals, business analysts, IT experts, administrative staff and outside vendors. On the client side, any engagement may be impacted by the power and priorities of C-suite executive management, business unit heads, procurement folks, the General Counsel, Assistant General Counsel, legal division heads, staff attorneys, paralegals and administrative staff and the client's outside vendors. There are a lot of players out on the field.

If you play connect-the-dots between all these stakeholders, you confront a spider-web of interactions that a lot of lawyers don't pay much attention to. You also see the huge potential for *disconnects*, for sentences that begin:

- "I assumed you knew."
- "Nobody told me about that."
- "Who knows about this?"
- "When did that happen?"
- "Whom shall I tell about this?"
- "That's not my responsibility."
- "That's above my level of authority."
- "You did *what?!?*"

In the next post, we'll share some war stories and horror stories of what happens when LPM planners and managers take communication for granted. We'll provide some advice on communication planning. But here's the punch line now: *in all aspects of LPM, front-end planning beats damage control any day.*

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