

Drivin' the Legal Project Management Road

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The managing partner of a large firm has just called with my most common FAQ: “So what’s the best way for *us* to implement Legal Project Management (LPM)? How do we gear up and get up to speed quickly?” Appropriating his automotive metaphor, I said that while I understood the desire to accelerate quickly, the firm should not simply charge off in hot-pursuit of the LPM first-adopters.

In LPM implementation, we stress the importance of “front end loading” – of taking the time to map out a clear destination and scope out all the activities (and only those activities!) needed to reach that destination. In designing an LPM initiative that will both be accepted rapidly and perform powerfully in the long run, step one is for all key players to understand and commit wholeheartedly to the LPM value proposition *as reflected in current conditions*, that is, why particular clients are clamoring for it, as well as the various ways it supports efficiency and profitability of different practice areas.

I suggested that once the executive management of the firm (Management Committee and Practice Group Leaders) has focused on this practical perspective, the firm should next assay its various practice groups to determine where the need is strongest for *immediately improved efficiencies* – the ones that need to drive improved realization or reduce write-offs and write downs. Firms that look at LPM utility this way often discover “high gain” focal points -- particular practice areas or client relationships that will benefit most from new operational approaches and profitability-driven thinking. In short, *these* are the “pressure points” where it makes most sense to concentrate initial LPM training efforts.

My caller asked whether his firm should take the approach “like you used with Dechert” (reminder: Dechert was the first global firm to require broad-based LPM training for all its partners, regardless of practice area). I told him that as a “first-mover,” Dechert had taken a bold full-immersion strategic approach designed to capitalize on an empty highway. Now the road signs are different, there’s more traffic on the road, and broad-spectrum LPM approaches may provide neither great PR nor an across-the-board increase in all lawyers’ efficiency and profitability. The most leverage may in fact come from practical LPM training where the rubber meets the road -- at the practice group or client team level.

Yes, effective LPM implementation does demand a clear focus on the Big Picture, on a clear answer to the “Why this? Why now?” question. Otherwise you risk, as another managing partner recently put it, “driving by looking in the rear view mirror.” That said, cars drive on roads, not maps. Firms need to translate LPM’s general value proposition into hands-on training – ASAP -- that includes the partners, associates, and in-house lawyers who will actually be driving the car.