

How Legal Project Management Can Tackle Stress and Burnout Attrition

By [Susan Raridon Lambreth](#) on February 28, 2021

Let's talk about stress. We already know that legal project management (LPM) plays a critical role in boosting law firm profitability and enhancing client relationships. But can it reduce stress levels? Absolutely. LPM instills a discipline and provides structure, for example, for budgeting, planning, and transparency— activities that can clearly mitigate unpleasant surprises. And where you have unpleasant surprises, stress will surely follow.

In fact, the [American Bar Association](#) confirms that stress has a key role in driving away many minorities, including women, from the legal profession. Stress is among the top reasons female lawyers report for leaving the practice of law. Other reasons include caretaking commitments, the emphasis on marketing or originating business and the number of billable hours, which are key stressors, as well.

In this article (our second in a series on LPM and D&I), we will explore how LPM can decrease toxic stress-related attrition, enhancing your law firm's diversity and inclusion efforts. Part one in this series can be found [here](#).

Stressed Female Lawyers are Leaving

"Women of color have the highest rate of attrition from law firms as they continue to face firm cultures where their efforts and contributions are neither sufficiently recognized nor rewarded..."

From "Left Out and Left Behind: The Hurdles, Hassles, and Heartaches of Achieving Long-Term Legal Careers for Women of Color," ABA Report (Jun. 22, 2020).

Attrition among women and diverse lawyers has been a critical issue for many years. A [2014 report](#) by the National Association of Women Lawyers confirmed that while law schools were producing female graduates in record numbers, the law firm attrition numbers were distressingly high. By 2016, for the first time, slightly [more women](#) than men entered law school. The trend is clearly moving in the right direction. But somewhere along the way to the most tenured positions in law firms, the pipeline is leaky. [ABA](#) reported that in 2010, 65 percent of lawyers were men. Ten years later? At 67 percent, the number has barely moved. Just a measly 20 percent of equity partners are female.

If you think that nothing much has changed, you're in good company. The [Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism](#) reported in 2020: "Not much has changed for women of color attorneys at law firms over the past 14 years, according to a study released last month by the American Bar Association's (ABA) Commission on Women in the Profession."

Attorney attrition is driven by chronically unhealthy stress levels coupled with billable hour demands of the profession. The [Camden County Bar](#) notes that some 25 percent of lawyers suffer from stress, which can manifest as depression, substance abuse, or even addiction.

As mentioned, women, in particular, report leaving the profession, in part, because of family obligations. [During the pandemic](#), female lawyers, already facing a wide range of care-taking responsibilities, are challenged even more. Gender

expectations have changed, yes, but not to the extent that will prevent Covid-19 from chipping away at some of the hard-fought gains that women have made.

Burnout is high for everyone, but particularly for mothers, black women, and senior-level women. Not surprisingly, women left the workforce in January 2021 at four times the rate of men, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). There must be a better way.

LPM as a Stress Management Tool

While LPM can't fix everything, here's where it can help. Historically, lawyers are famous for finishing projects at the last minute. Whether it's due to procrastination or unforeseen changes, the net result is that the legal profession is unnecessarily stressful. In comparison to, for example, business schools, law schools generally provide minimal training in the skills needed to manage projects efficiently. LPM is a discipline that includes the planning and active management of matters. It can help matter teams avoid "fire drills," as well as the hallmark peaks and valleys of legal workloads.

When the team is trained in LPM, the entire process of handling a matter end-to-end results in less stress. Project management, contrary to common misconception, does not involve spending the day hunched over a project plan. It is mainly about clarifying roles and responsibilities, aligning interests of clients and their legal providers and having clear communication. LPM done right allows lawyers and their teams to avoid the issues that drive clients and outside counsel crazy, such as over-staffing matters, mismanaging expectations, overspending and— the biggest concern on both sides— billing snafus.

Do you find that matters progress more smoothly when you are:

- Facilitating open dialogue via kick-off meetings, status updates and regular communication?
- Understanding and scoping the work in advance?
- Communicating in a timely manner roles, responsibilities, risks and expectations?
- Escalating risks and concerns to the appropriate stakeholders?
- Planning and staffing appropriately with the right people at the right time?
- Tracking progress and accomplishments to manage the timeline as agreed?
- Monitoring workloads so that it is more rare that anyone is overwhelmed or short of time?
- Providing on-time, no-surprises delivery?

That's what LPM can help you do. And it's how you keep your best people, as well as your clients satisfied. It's clear that work is better and less stressful when you can avoid incomplete deliverables, uncommunicated expectations, fake deadlines, and those "whose-on-first" moments when the team isn't performing at its finest. LPM can enhance efficiency and lift the morale of hard-working team members. That should help your law firm experience lower levels of attrition, especially of women and minorities.

About the Authors:

Susan Lambreth has over 25 years of experience as a consultant to the legal profession. Susan assists firms in

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