It's Not the Same Thing: Lawyers Need Legal Project Management

By Carla Landry on December 6, 2021

No matter who you get to do legal project management (LPM) in your firm, one fact remains: you are working with lawyers. There's really no need to trot out the herding cats metaphor here. You already understand what you're up against. Lawyers are not going to do textbook project management. For one, it is way too intricate a process for most lawyers to consider. Eyes will glaze over, jaws will set, there may even be gnashing of teeth. "We don't need this project management stuff," they will proclaim.

And you know what? They're right.

Lawyers do need a better way to get the work done though. But, it's not project management in the strictest sense. This isn't just a matter of semantics. If you are going to have a successful *legal* project management effort, the differences are key to understanding how the effort will be best positioned and supported.

Here's where they differ:

LPM applies project management techniques to the handling of legal matters. It provides structure to the extent that structure can be provided. An IT, engineering or manufacturing project is fundamentally different. Engineering, for example, whether you're designing a mousetrap or a mass transit system, is a relatively linear process that involves collaborative efforts. The goal of project management is to reduce variation. That works quite well in many industries where the process is linear and fixed, as are many of the costs.

The law is different. That doesn't mean that every case is bespoke. It's not. But there may be opposing counsel that's paid to destroy everything your team is seeking to prove, and paid by the hour to do so. Even for transactional work, you cannot ignore that there are people on the other side of the table looking for an advantage. In IT, there is no large team on the other side trying to undo what the IT team is trying to do.

Lawyers are different. We've discussed lawyer personalities ad infinitum. But many lawyers are not naturally collaborative and they are skeptical by training and nature. So to get them to do the things that make traditional project management work smoothly is a big stretch. In most law firms, the compensation structure underscores these Lone Ranger traits. Garden variety project management does not work, at least not the way it's envisioned.

Further, law firms are hierarchical structures run by partners. Nothing works in law firms unless the partners get on board. If partners feel threatened or challenged, or even just not interested, LPM falls flat. It is much easier to make a change within the firm if the change is aligned with the values and the beliefs inherent to the partners. Conversely, the ownership structure of most corporations is different. Project managers are responsible to the highly sanctioned project management office to follow the prescribed methodology. Project managers in other fields tell people what to do in a way that would be abhorrent in law firms, especially with partners.

By contrast, *legal* projects managers have responsibility but typically don't have sufficient authority. They need to navigate within a structure that is distinctly different from traditional project managers. The latter get to make the plan,

communicate the plan, and hold everyone accountable.

Legal Project Management for Law Firms

This doesn't mean, however, that LPM based on the principles of project management aren't viable in a law firm. Law firms need to be realistic, however, and take the steps needed to ensure that LPM is welcome. LPM must be designed for law firms – and individual law firm cultures – and put in the context of legal work. This is the only way lawyers will embrace it. Additionally, there are several ways to ensure a successful LPM initiative:

- Start with the business framework. Educate everyone involved in LPM about the firm's underlying business model. The math is easy for most lawyers. But they must understand how the firm makes and loses money and the importance of predictability for clients.

- Support legal project managers. When legal project managers are not firm partners, they lack the legitimate authority needed to keep the project moving efficiently ahead. This means that the firm may need to implement systems to ensure that legal project managers build more trust, influence, and referent power. This might include, for example, advocacy from firm leaders and additional training.

- Provide just-in-time, just enough, training. Lawyers don't need a week of intensive training, thousands of hours of project management experience, and additional weeks of study to complete a PMP certification course. Training should be easily available, perhaps even online, and require minimal time. The materials must be relevant to the practice of law.

- Reinforce that uncomfortable budget discussions can be a thing of the past. Matter scoping is critically important and should provide immediate relief for partners, allowing them to budget with greater accuracy and providing a tool for managing the work with fewer surprises.

- Prove the business case with solid savings. Legal project management does not require software, an extensive support structure, or, as mentioned, a lot of training. You could launch immediately with a pilot and begin to realize cost savings that will increase the demand for LPM throughout the firm.

Legal project management *is* different. While it has its challenges, there are distinct advantages over traditional project management. If you get your lawyers on board, the upside benefits in terms of bottom-line profitability are substantial. It requires just a little effort and a pilot group to get started. LPM is your best opportunity to ensure that lawyers are doing the work they love, contributing even greater value to the client and enhancing profits overall.