

Still Asking Which Comes First – Project Management or Process Improvement?

By [Carla Landry](#) on April 9, 2013

Two years ago I wrote a blog addressing “which comes first, legal project management (LPM) or legal process improvement (LPI)?” At the time, there was a lot of confusion about the two terms. They were used interchangeably and the concepts of both were included in defining one or the other. Now, two years later, there’s more clarity around the definitions, but the question of which should come first still remains.

As we predicted several years ago, if you use LPM techniques, you inevitably identify ways to improve some aspects of the project (i.e., process) as you manage work more carefully and with more tools than in the past. The difference is in the level of scrutiny of the steps in the process. The resulting change from LPI is a more efficient process. LPM results in a project that is well managed and completed on time and on budget. Ideally, the firm would pursue both, but given the pressures most firms are under, it is usually better to do something well than to try to do too much at once.

The truth is the two methodologies support each other. Often, when developing project plans (as done in LPM), one identifies ways to do things more efficiently (i.e., one finds some process improvement opportunities). Further, LPM skills are essential in order to manage the new, more efficient processes that are developed, if you want those new processes to be successful. Both methodologies provide opportunities for improved performance. Today, a few firms are not only improving performance with LPM, but are recognizing the need to analyze the steps in some matter types more closely and identify where there are short-term and longer-term opportunities to streamline those steps and those types of matters.

Two years ago, that blog closed with “in a perfect world” law firms would embark upon LPI first and then use LPM to manage those processes effectively. Ultimately, the legal arena decided, for the most part, that LPM comes first. The question is how quickly anyone will take the step to improve processes across more matter types and potentially dramatically increase efficiency and effectiveness and, ultimately, profitability. We’ll explore what’s inhibiting broad acceptance of LPI in future blogs.