

Still Want to Be a Lemming!

By [Carla Landry](#) on December 10, 2013

A month ago my colleague, Marcie Borgal Shunk, wrote “imitation may be the greatest form of flattery, but it is one of the worst approaches to establishing market leadership in today’s rapidly changing legal world ([Leading Through Market Disruption...](#)).” As she noted, partners frequently respond to new business ideas with a question: “Which firms are doing this already?” Unfortunately, even in today’s rapidly changing legal market, most law firms are still hesitant to distinguish themselves with something different.

Nearly seven years ago, I thought it would be a perfect time to start working with firms to redesign how they deliver their legal services. Several “big” Fortune 100 clients were already talking to their outside counsel about legal spend and value. A few firms were taking the leap and making changes to their service delivery, albeit mostly under the radar. The market was stable and law firm revenue and profits had been rising for years. In short, times were good, so why not take advantage of good times and stable revenue and introduce some change? My thoughts fell on deaf ears...except for those firms already embracing this level of change.

A few years later, the market tanked and I thought, now, this is a perfect time to really do this. Clients are squeezing profits and law firms are in a panic, as were most other industries. In short, the urgency for change existed. Redesigning the delivery of legal services with different resources (staffing, technology, etc.) would help maintain and even continue to grow profits. It would also distinguish your firm as “new, different and innovative” – a position that would gain market share as a result (hindsight observation, of course). Unfortunately, the urgency turned to “same old, same old” and law firms trimmed expenses (in some cases very aggressively) to maintain profits or minimize profit declines.

A couple years after that, legal project management became THE hot topic, THE new approach to managing legal work. In short, enough firms started to embrace legal project management so that other firms decided it was safe to follow suit. There was definitely a lemming effect to the adoption of legal project management. I participated in spreading the word. I developed programs to help lawyers understand how to better manage their legal matters.

Now, I’m not suggesting that legal project management isn’t critical to managing matters – quite the contrary. Legal project management tools speak directly to Marcie’s points on how to be transparent (i.e., present clients with a matter plan including staffing and timeline, inform internal team members of budget concerns, etc.). Legal project management is also critical to managing to a new process, a new approach to delivering legal services. But one needs to change their service delivery (change the process) before they can manage to that new process. I merely remain curious as to why so few firms will embrace the need to change how they deliver their services to their clients. In short, change how they deliver value...value that is defined by the client paying the invoice, perhaps even happily paying it.

How many firms will it take to start the lemming effect? It happened with legal project management. When will it happen with legal process improvement?