



MANAGEMENT

LEGAL PROJECT

# The next generation of Legal Project Managers

By David Cruickshank

The apprenticeship model for training new lawyers simply isn't adequate for legal project management skills, with potential competitive losses for law firms that retain the old model. Here's a better blueprint for LPM training within your firm.

**L**aw firms are waking up to client demands for more efficiency and value for money in managing matters. True, some of those demands are clumsy and blunt: “No first-year associates on our matters,” or “We cap each deposition on this case at XX hours.”

Nevertheless, firms can now respond in a constructive manner with a counter-proposal that demonstrates strong capacities in legal project management (LPM) and fee management. Instead of “ticking boxes” and offering itemized responses to itemized cost controls, firms could show clients they're “on their side” by providing more management efficiency to achieve the overall client goal of value.

Looking down the road, however, many law firms face a challenge: How will we develop the next generation of legal project managers?

Most firms' individual apprenticeship system can't develop more than a few top legal project managers, not enough to meet sophisticated clients'



demands in the “new normal” of legal services. Even those who do rise to a level of expertise now get there by way of accident, outside learning, or sheer force of labour rather than systematic development.

When it comes to legal project management, the apprenticeship model is broken. Other professional service firms and corporate clients demonstrated years ago that more “systems thinking” is needed in law firms. And more technology-supported project management skills are required of rising professionals. When will law firms follow?

In an apprenticeship system for project management, a few juniors receive lengthy one-on-one observation and mentoring and rise to the status of master craftsman. Long after it has been abandoned in other professional service firms, this system survives in law firms because:

- there are a few smart, hard-working associates who can learn to project manage, to a basic standard, almost on their own;
- those “in the club” (*i.e.*, partners) tend to prize the individual survival skills

of those aspiring to join the club;

- firms are reluctant to bill clients hourly for items like planning time, team meetings and team conference calls, so teamwork is less prized in the contest for billable, collectible hours;
- firms have been slow to reach across professional or corporate boundaries to adopt proven project management tools; and
- there are not enough fixed-fee matters in a firm's business mix to drive changes.

Legal project manager training encounters similar difficulties inside law departments, whose members are mostly law firm alumni, not managers from other branches of the client's company who might be highly conversant with project management and systems thinking. They were trained in the law firm apprenticeship system and accept its results.

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Do we have the means and motivation to break from the apprenticeship model and develop the next generation of project managers? As to motivation, anyone listening to the Association for Corporate Counsel or their own clients in the past few years has heard the requests for new fee structures, more predictability and appropriate staffing. We are now seeing "legal project management capacity" show up in

RFP's for legal services. Who wants to be knocked out of the running in future beauty contests like this?

Be aware that your competition may have LPM training capacity and may be already promoting it to clients. Firms like Dechert LLP have done a bottom-to-top overhaul of their systems, conducted intensive training, and created not a few, but many "next generation" project managers.

Do we have the means to develop a larger cadre of legal project managers? I believe that we do, but it's not as easy or inexpensive as many think. These are typical commitments that a firm will have to demonstrate:

- Firms with internal competency models expand their competency models to include legal project management.
- Firm leaders know how to get buy-in for change (or get outside help to achieve it).
- There is a project management model that can be easily communicated across practice groups, even though implementation will differ in those groups.

- Practice groups commit to the hard work of developing protocols and standard practices.
- Firms invest in intensive skills training with measurable results, especially for senior associates.
- Leaders reach outside the firm to find assistance and best practices from other professional service firms.
- Firms invite clients to measure the difference in services after developing project management capacity.

In summary, there is a strong business case for adopting legal project management capacity. The traditional apprenticeship model can't produce enough talented managers, and the lateral market is even harder to plumb for such talent. Competitors are already telling your clients they can do this better, with better cost results. The motivation is apparent, but firms need to invest in new means to develop the next generation of legal project managers. •



## Talent leadership

**David Cruickshank** helps firms build top talent functions through strategic reviews, competency models and training. He has worked with Am Law 200, Canadian and U.K. firms on talent and management skills for more than 20 years, including in-house with a top New York law firm. He helps leaders create consensus for changes sought by clients, speeding up business results for both.

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