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INSIDE OUT

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HY IS PROJECT MANAGEMENT IMPORTANT FOR LAWYERS?

Martini: Project management is key because clients demand it. We see it with the trend in our industry toward alternative fee arrangements and other mechanisms which are making the billable hour more obsolete. Just as certain industries such as manufacturing have successfully used principles of project management for years, the legal profession and other service industries such as medicine, accounting and consulting have evolved in such a way that their projects are likewise being broken down into their constituent parts and analyzed closely to drive greater overall efficiencies. There are various elements that go into effectively managing a legal project, including bringing in the right mix of talent that is both efficient as well as cost-effective. This analysis can become quite complex and requires skill in predicting how long the project will take, by when certain tasks need to be completed and by whom. It is also necessary to have a good sense as to where the project may go off the rails along the way and to have contingency plans lined up.

Susler: In this era of increasing pressure to perform at the highest quality for the lowest possible cost, project management is essential to success and even organizational longevity. Project management is important to enable lawyers to complete their work efficiently, expeditiously and thoroughly, although as an in-house lawyer, I cannot plan or manage projects in a legal vacuum. I must work closely with my business teams to discern their needs and goals and to understand the nature, scope, extent, resources and timing of any given matter. All of this is critical to successfully supporting my business colleagues and my company.

HOW HAS THE DISCUSSION ABOUT PROJECT MANAGEMENT FOR LAWYERS EVOLVED?

Martini: It has gone from being a somewhat avant-garde concept in the context of law firm practice to an essential skill in the toolbox of every lawyer who is trying to effectively manage client matters. Twenty-five years ago, I studied project management as part of my industrial engineering degree and, at the time, many people thought that service businesses such as the law were mutually exclusive from this type of discipline. Now, nothing could be further from the truth. Effective project management is crucial to help ensure that a firm is providing its services in the most streamlined, cost-effective way while also making sure it is maintaining the necessary margins to make the work worthwhile for the firm to perform. The principles of project management are simple: planning, processes, people and power. In addition to doing the requisite planning to be able to map the necessary processes and the people who will help execute it, you also need to know where the authority/power lies for decision-making from both



MANAGING MANAGEMENT

In-house or at a firm, project management matters

By CHRISTINA L. MARTINI and DAVID G. SUSLER

the firm and client sides in the event they need to be called upon to help push things forward.

Susler: Eighteen years ago, I went in-house with an engineering consulting company and took an introductory PM course. I quickly understood I had always employed many of the same concepts managing my litigation practice over the preceding 12 years, just without the formality. Now, as Tina said, it has become an essential and more formalized tool for lawyers.

WHAT DOES PROJECT MANAGEMENT LOOK LIKE IN YOUR PRACTICE?

Martini: My methodology tends to be the same regardless of what I am working on. I carefully defining what I am trying to accomplish, both substantively as well as from a timing standpoint, and then reverse-engineering the project from there. There are both hard and soft deadlines built in along the way, with contingency plans in case the necessary resources get delayed or are unavailable, or if the results the client was hoping for do not come to fruition. Given my academic and work experience with project management during college, implementing those principles fortunately is second nature to me, but I have seen many attorneys struggle with it over the years. Make a concerted effort to master the principles and techniques of project management so that you can put them to effective use in your practice.

Susler: I too use project management principles in my practice, though I do not use formal PM tools. Especially for larger projects, whether litigation management, negotiating long-term supply agreements or an M&A deal, I start by asking important questions of the business leaders in order to understand the true nature and scope of the project, their deadlines, the economic and strategic importance of the matter to the company and, of critical importance, their goals and desired outcomes. I revisit these discussions periodically to keep the business stakeholders apprised of developments. Revisiting your plan is crucial, especially if, as Tina mentioned, roadblocks or detours arise. [CL](#)

Christina L. Martini is a practicing attorney, author and columnist. She is chair of the Chicago intellectual property practice group and the national hiring partner of associate recruiting at DLA Piper and sits on its executive committee. She focuses on domestic and international trademark, copyright, domain name, internet, advertising and unfair competition law.

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To submit a question for future columns, e-mail questions.insideout@gmail.com