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From Hesitancy to Acceptance: How to Encourage Seasoned Law Firm Members to Embrace New Technologies

developers · Tuesday, May 25th, 2021

Law firms are entities built on tradition, where the experience that comes with aging is revered and often celebrated at the highest levels of the firm. But in today's legal environment, technology and innovation rank just as high as maturity. Change has become a constant within the industry and law firms must keep up in order to remain relevant.

Unfortunately, getting every member of the firm on board with tech changes can be challenging for firm administrators. Some more seasoned employees may resist new ways of handling business, or they may find it difficult to grasp unfamiliar technologies.

But these difficulties don't mean that administrators must abandon the firm's technology plans. It also doesn't mean that seasoned members of the firm will be left behind. With the following tips and strategies, law firm administrators can get all members of the firm onboard the technology train.

Why the Pushback

Legal technology is transforming every segment of the legal community, including the workforce, the delegation of tasks, economics, skillsets, and client expectations. Many attorneys don't like these tech advances because they recognize their effect on the traditional roles of practicing law. As new legal technologies emerge, the profession transitions from its lawyer-centric traditions into a more tech-driven competitive marketplace. And it's not attorneys who are pushing these changes. Clients are also consumers and they bring their consumer-driven expectations with them when seeking legal representation.

Law firm administrators must also consider the generation gap that may be at play within the firm. Young legal professionals cannot imagine a workplace without technology, so they often welcome and adapt quickly to new innovations. Their other colleagues remember, and may even long for, a time when the only technology an attorney needed was a telephone and a typewriter. When this is your perspective, the prospect of new technologies can be terrifying.

Put Away the Misconceptions

To start promoting the use of technology among more seasoned members of the firm, administrators must first put aside misconceptions about this segment of their workforce. Preconceived doubts about their abilities and willingness can disadvantage the firm as a whole.

The truth is that most baby boomers don't fear tech, they just see it differently than younger workers do.

Here are some additional misconceptions that law firm administrators may have about seasoned workers:

- Resistant to all workplace changes – Change is hard for anyone, especially when established procedures have worked thus far. But show a worker how technology will make their life easier, and you will have a worker willing to change.
- They need too much guidance – While more seasoned workers may prefer one-on-one instruction, as opposed to "figuring things out" on their own, there is another way to look at this dynamic. Unlike their less-experienced colleagues, some law firm members may see the trial-and-error aspect of "figuring things out" as a waste of valuable time. They prefer to learn things correctly the first time, which may take more hand-holding but will prove worthwhile in the end.
- All seasoned firm members feel the same about technology – It's easy to generalize, but this assumption is wrong. Teach savvy individuals come in all ages, just as tech-phobic individuals come in all ages. Just because more seasoned employees did not grow up surrounded by technology, it doesn't mean that they don't have any tech skills. Several studies have demonstrated that seasoned workers are just as likely to use as much technology as their younger peers.

Law firm administrators must have honest discussions with the hesitant members of the firm so that they understand the value of new technologies. Help them understand how they can benefit from new innovations. Then, provide them with the type of training they need to actually learn.

Use Various Training Options to Bridge the Gap

One training method may not fit all. Firm administrators should think outside the box and consider alternative training methods like online tutorials and mentorships. Mentoring can consist of formal partnerships or informal training between members of the firm who are more tech-savvy and members of the firm who are tech-challenged.

The most effective strategy will look at training options from different perspectives to consider what works best for individual members of the firm. For example, human resources can craft individual tech development plans for each stage of the firm's career cycle.

When workers are approached from a perspective of productivity and skill-building, they will see the firm as being supportive of their growth instead of forcing them to make changes. That type of motivation drives success. When seasoned members have a reason to change, along with real encouragement, they will be more willing to embrace new technologies.

Show Partners the "Cents" of Innovation

If the firm members who resist technology are members of law firm leadership, the financial benefits of technology can be real incentives. For example, in this age of technology law firms are experiencing competition from some new kids on the legal block. Alternative Legal Service Providers (ALSPs) have made gains within such technology-driven market segments as e-discovery or legal research. These providers are taking business away from traditional law firms by offering specific legal services in a more efficient and cost-effective manner. For this reason, law firms must implement new technologies in order to stay competitive and relevant.

A lack of technology skillsets will place lawyers and law firms at a significant disadvantage moving forward. For example, e-discovery has completely transformed the task of discovery over the last decade. Using artificial technology, firms can now search through voluminous documents in a fraction of the time it used to take.

In addition, courts and legal service clients have come to expect certain tech advances from law firms. Courts have increasingly turned to electronic filings and applications over the last few years. In addition, judges are starting to expect the use of technology when reviewing the reasonableness of legal fees. If law firms do not voluntarily implement these changes among their members, outside influences will force them to evolve.

The demand for traditional legal practice is diminishing, while the demand for tech-based legal service delivery continuously grows. Law firm administrators must communicate to their leaders that resisting these changes can have lasting negative effects in the years to come.

Call-Upon the ABA

While the American Bar Association (ABA) has been slow to implement technical training at the law school level, they have addressed the expectation for tech skills and knowledge among practicing attorneys and law firms. In 2012, the ABA modified the Model Rules to extend a lawyer's duty of competence to keep "abreast of changes in the law and its practice," to include knowing "the benefits and risks and associated with relevant technology." A number of state bars have followed, modifying their rules to include technological competence within attorney competence.

These changes are not limited to law firms. Corporate legal departments have been experiencing similar enhancements. The Corporate Legal Operations Consortium, as well as the ACC Legal Operations Group, has designated technology as a multidisciplinary competency optimizing the delivery of legal services.

The Future Success of Law Firms Hinges on the Acceptance of Technology by All Members

As law firm administrators seek to introduce new technologies into their firms, they may find that some more seasoned members resist the changes. But the legal industry is quickly changing, and innovative technologies must be a part of that transition. By implementing these strategies, law firm administrators can encourage older members of the firm to embrace tech advances.

This entry was posted on Tuesday, May 25th, 2021 at 12:00 am and is filed under General
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