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Why Law Firms Should Invest in Legal Project Management

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“Do more with less.” This oxymoron of a saying seems to imply that lawyers have a Costco-like quality; there’s always a way that they can commoditize their work and charge less for it. This concept is anathema to the legal industry.

So, while clients have expectations that lawyers should deliver more and more value to them, meeting those expectations can seem impossible to a law firm with traditional staffing structures, billing protocols, and technology.

The good news is that there is a way to accomplish the same legal work more efficiently: by building disciplined, repeatable legal processes that you can apply to every matter to keep budgets and workflows in check. This process improvement, in a nutshell, is legal project management (sometimes abbreviated as LPM).

What is legal project management?

Legal project management is the “application of project management principles and practices to enhance the delivery of legal services,” according to the [International Institute of Legal Project Management](#). Susan Raridon Lambreth, the chair and founder of the LPM Institute and the founder and chair of the LawVision Group, suggests, “LPM is what lawyers already do, just more systematically and using the language of business.” (For more of Lambreth’s insights, check out [The Power of Legal Project Management: A Practical Handbook](#), published by the ABA.)

To put it more simply, legal project management is a structured way to manage legal projects based on consistent, repeatable processes. A “project” is the creation of a product or result with a finite beginning and end. For example, a project may be a lawsuit, a merger or acquisition, a regulatory filing, an investigation, or a contract.

Typically, the project management process consists of five steps.

1. Defining the scope

In this initial stage of project management, you identify the goals of the project, which will serve as the guiding star for all of your work. So, during intake, you’ll need to gather information from your client to understand their expectations for your work. You’ll also assign the primary lawyer or other person serving as the project manager for the matter.

When the scope is clearly defined, you can better set the initiative's milestones, timeline, budget, and staffing. You should also clarify with the client what the deliverables will be.

2. Establishing the project plan

With the project's goals firmly established, you can define which tasks and activities you need to accomplish to achieve your desired outcome. Start by dividing the project into phases punctuated by milestones. Then you break down each phase into specific tasks and activities. Finally, you prioritize and schedule the tasks.

The schedule should be detailed, setting the starting and ending dates for each task and for the entire project. Work backward to develop the schedule from the deadline or due date for the project.

This step is when you also assign the work to the appropriate people, whether lawyers, paralegals, support staff, or third-party providers. If your deadline is tight, you might need to retain additional personnel. A checklist for types of work that should be outsourced can accelerate this process. Once you've chosen your team members, clarify the responsibilities of everyone assigned to the project.

Finally, set the overall budget using estimated costs for each task and activity. Be sure to get quotes from any third-party vendors when developing the budget to avoid surprises on the back end.

Once you've created a project plan, you can use it as a template and checklist for future projects.

3. Carrying out the legal work

Kick-off the project with an initial meeting that reviews the expectations of every legal team member as well as the timeline and budget. Thereafter, set a regular cadence of meetings to check in on the project's progress. The frequency of meetings depends on your deadline: you'll meet more frequently for urgent projects with a short fuse and weekly or monthly for longer-term projects.

At each meeting, the project manager should review the team's progress against the project plan. But you'll need to do more than review the project's status. It's also critical to review key performance indicators to make sure the project is on time and on budget. For example, you may want to run a budget-to-variance report to understand whether spending is on track.

You'll also need to monitor the project for any risks to its progress. For instance, you might identify bottlenecks in your processes that you need to resolve or other issues that might cause delay.

If any changes in scope, schedule, budget, or people are necessary, you'll need to revisit the project plan. Often, new information will surface and require adjustments, considering their effect on downstream activities and tasks. If the changes necessitate pushing back the timeline, you should communicate the adjustments to your team, client, and other stakeholders immediately.

4. Evaluating the outcome and reviewing the process

When you've achieved your goal, you aren't done yet. Review the final product with your client and receive their feedback. Their input will be invaluable if you'll be completing similar projects in the future.

This is also the time to share any lessons learned with your team. You may need to adjust the timing or scheduling of activities in the future. If you had to adjust budgets and responsibilities midstream, make a note for future projects. Consider what went well and what didn't, how accurate your original project plan was, and how well the team worked together.

What do legal project management roles do?

Legal project managers take full responsibility for planning, managing, and executing legal projects. They have day-to-day oversight of the entire project plan, from personnel to budgets to schedules.

Accordingly, project managers really need a special closet to house all of the hats they wear! Here are just a few examples of the work they do:

- Oversee the project team and coordinate their work
- Establish and manage the project budget
- Set and manage the activity and task schedule
- Review the project work for accuracy and completion
- Adjust the project plan to changing circumstances
- Keep the team and client apprised of the project's status and timeline

Most law firms don't have the budget to hire a project management professional. Instead, they may bring in a specialist to lead a legal project management training session for their team, then assign a lawyer or paralegal with project management skills to handle projects.

What are the benefits of implementing legal project management?

Legal project management can deliver a host of benefits for both clients and law firms.

On the client-side, more matters conclude on time and on budget. Throughout the project, there is greater transparency, so clients can jump in to address the course of a project and ensure legal spending stays in check. There are also fewer surprises for clients at the end of projects.

For law firms, the benefits include these and many more:

- More efficiency because a project plan helps law firms make smarter use of their resources and better use of their time
- More accurate forecasting because the more projects your firm completes, the better you'll be at estimating your budget, timeline, and chances of success
- Higher profitability because there are fewer write-offs and write-downs since you've thought through the budget up front and kept the client apprised throughout the matter
- Stronger client relationships because clients are happy with the work, leading to more referrals
- Lower stress because lawyers don't have to fret about unanticipated risks and costs or about losing clients because of cost overruns

What are some ways my firm can implement legal project management into already established processes?

Implementing legal project management can seem like a heavy lift — especially for a profession that's change-averse. But it's easy to start implementing project plans, templates, and checklists for recurring types of projects.

For example, law firms that handle mergers and acquisitions can likely develop a series of checklists and tools that prepare legal teams for every transaction. The team can develop a task list to ensure nothing falls through the cracks if they're handling an acquisition. They can also create a template for a kickoff meeting agenda to ensure they touch on every important topic for the project team, from deal documents to timetables and communication protocols. Finally, they can use a post-mortem checklist after the deal closes to debrief, capture lessons learned, and improve the process for next time.

Litigation matters are also a good way to start testing out legal management principles. Law firms that have agreed to alternative fee arrangements can apply legal project management principles to ensure they adhere to their budget. Firms can use checklists for e-discovery processes, including data identification and collection, to make sure that no stone is left unturned. They can also use project management tools to assign the right level of resources, whether attorneys or paralegals, to the right task to deliver high-quality legal work products.

How can legal practice management software help with project management?

Legal practice management is complex. Fortunately, legal practice management software has features built right in that are designed to tackle much of the work of project managers.

- **Task management:** Practice management software can help you assign tasks to team members, establish a list of to-dos, and set a schedule. It can also show you the status of projects and notify you when a team member completes a task.
- **Calendar:** Software with a [calendar](#) feature lets you schedule important deadlines in your project plan.
- **Document management:** Teams can use [document management](#) features to build a central repository where you can corral, categorize, and edit project documents.
- **Collaboration and communication:** Software with a built-in chat system makes it easy for team members to collaborate in real-time on matters.
- **Work balancing:** A work balancing report helps avoid overloading your resources so they avoid burnout and can deliver the highest-quality work on time.
- **Work prioritization:** A [dashboard](#) helps you understand what tasks are the most urgent so you can allocate resources to them.
- **Time tracking:** Team members can enter time through a mobile app or in integrations with their Word applications, so you can see how much work has been billed against a task or activity budget in real-time.
- **Reporting:** Built-in and customizable [reporting](#) show a variety of important metrics at a glance, including the work billed against a budget and team member productivity.

Through proactive planning, risk management, budgeting, and resource allocation, legal project management helps law firms streamline the work they do on legal matters. Applying disciplined

legal project management also helps lawyers build greater consistency around law firm processes, which, in turn, delivers greater predictability, meeting client expectations regarding cost and experience. Combine these benefits of legal project management with technology, and lawyers can achieve their growth and client satisfaction goals faster and with less effort than ever before.

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