

Excellence in IT

For an IT director to be judged as successful, they need to be in charge of a successful and respected department. What makes matters more complicated is that the definition of success varies considerably according to who is making the judgement. In a law firm, everyone is touched to a greater or lesser extent by the IT systems, and everyone will have a (differing) view as to how well things are being done.

While people's judgement of the IT department will vary depending on who they normally have contact with, a good department will be working as a team to ensure that everyone has the back-up of the others to deliver an effective service.

Helpdesk and support

First let us take a look at the most common view of the IT department, the helpdesk. In the very best departments, this is exactly how it is seen: somewhere you can contact where you will get help. This help extends not just to support for IT problems, but also advice on the best way of doing things, making arrangements for different and liaising with other departments. What people want to find is skilled staff who understand both the technology and the work of a law firm, and can solve the pressing business problem the caller is experiencing even if the specific IT issue requires further work.

There are probably as many different ways of arranging the helpdesk function as there are helpdesks. It may be very centralised with clearly defined first, second and third line responsibilities, or it may have been spread about the business so far that front line support staff are embedded in the parts of the business they are looking after. There is not a right way and a wrong way to do this; part of the skill of a good IT director is to create a model for supporting their firm that suits the way that particular organisation works, and the culture it has evolved.

Another contributory factor to the perception of the helpdesk and support staff is the expectation of the users. In some cases, this can be impossibly high leading to a guaranteed failure to live up such expectations, with corresponding problems with dissatisfaction of both IT and non IT staff alike, and often a growing animosity between the two. The task of setting the level of service that IT should be delivering falls to the IT director and to the firm's senior management team. It is not enough though for there to be agreement at this level; the service must be explained to the firm as a whole. If you are running a 'no frills' service but the lawyers think they are due business class from a national carrier, then they are going to be very disappointed.

Try taking a look at the statistics from your own IT helpdesk. If the majority of calls are not of the break-fix type, but are requests for advice and assistance, you can be happy that the firm

is finding the helpdesk to be an asset. Low call volumes that are all about critical failures do not indicate a successful helpdesk, but rather a failing one that is only called as a last resort. Of course, part of the success of the support team is outside their control as it is much harder to look after a badly designed and unreliable system.

System admin and design

Behind the scenes is another group of IT specialists, who are probably not known outside the department and who will be judged only by their failures. These are the system administrators who keep everything running smoothly, the people who run the email system, look after the database servers and whose actions can quickly affect the whole firm. They need to be highly skilled technically, but also highly organised. Human error is the most common cause of system problems, so to reduce the support load it is best to have humans who do not err (or more realistically people who make few mistakes and procedures to try and catch these). In many cases, this team of people will fix problems before anyone is aware of them. They will service and maintain systems so that they continue to run smoothly and safely.

Even further from the end user than these people are the architects and system designers. Again, these unsung workers have a huge impact on how the IT systems function. Part of their role is to design systems that are reliable and can be kept running, within the limits of the budget set by the firm. The other, equally important, part of the position is to make sure that the systems meet the needs of the firm and the business design goals that were set, ideally with some adaptability to changes in working practices.

An important aspect of getting the right people in place for these back office functions is their training. These staff are working in specialised areas, and while practical experience will help a lot, only training will ensure that they have the knowledge to deal with new situations as they arise, without having to learn on the job at the expense of system downtime. Quite apart from that developing their skills will keep them interested and involved with the job, which should help to retain skills in house and allow the firm to develop a succession plan for the more senior roles.

Project management

Alongside the technical staff, all good IT departments will have their own administrative and management people. Effective purchasing and maintaining good relationships with suppliers can easily differentiate a really good department from a mediocre one. Flexibility is a key criterion of a successful team, and when it comes to delivering IT services, the supply chain and external support companies are an important part of that team. A good relationship with external companies will mean that they are more likely to provide you with flexibility on delivering their services, and will help you out with sudden and unexpected requirements.

Similarly project management skills are vitally important. While the role of the helpdesk and support staff is to make sure the systems that are currently in place run smoothly and are

used to the best advantage, much of the work of IT is to do with change, and management of that change. The project management team must be organised and able to keep track of the state of play of the current work, and identify and deal with risks to those projects before they become a big issue. Part of this role requires them to be highly skilled communicators as they have to keep in touch both with the IT team (in order to find out what they are doing) and with the firm's senior management and the relevant business users (in order to keep them informed and ensure that the project continues to meet the business goals.)

The project management team is probably the hardest area to get right in an IT department, as their work touches every other role. They have to work effectively with the system architects to design the new systems and plan the change, and with the system administrators to implement that change. They have to make sure the support staff understand the changes at a technical level and understand the business impact of these changes. They need to make sure the end users of any changing systems are aware of what is happening and when, and are able to work with these changes when they go live. The difference between a good IT department and a top IT department will probably always come down to how good the project managers are.

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In summary, a successful IT department will consist of many types of people each with different skills. Some of them will be client facing and some will stay hidden away. Some will know a little bit about most things, and others will know their speciality in great depth. Working as a team and communicating with each other they will provide an important service to the firm to great effect.

At the end of the day however, the quality of any department is only as good as the quality of the people in it. A good IT director will recruit highly competent staff, and inspire them to work at their best and help them to develop. They in return will take pride in their job and will contribute ideas and effort to improving the business. An IT department like that will be well on its way to achieving excellence.

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