

Managing the IT Manager

One of the hardest parts of running a law firm is the management of the IT function, and in particular the relationship between the management team and the IT staff. When this relationship works well, firms can achieve much more and the IT department has a correspondingly high reputation. However if the Executive and the IT manager do not have a good understanding, the firm will be held back and morale will be very low, leading to a poor service. A full look at legal IT management would be a lot longer than this article; indeed, some people have based a whole career on the topic. Instead, here are a few pointers for both the partners and the IT department to bear in mind.

Lawyers and IT professionals are different people

The legal profession is highly structured, both in terms of the work and the career path, and appeals to a certain type of person. The whole of IT operates on a more cutting edge, seat-of-the-pants type of approach, and the people who work within in are therefore very different to those who become layers. This difference is apparent in the way the groups typically work (one plans and documents, the other just gets on and does things), which can lead to frustration. It is also apparent in the approach to the job as a whole. Lawyers may spend their whole life in the same firm, even now, whereas most IT staff view three years as a long time. This can lead a firm to regard IT staff as not committed, although in reality they are usually highly loyal and work beyond the requirements of the role to support their employer,

Good managers on both sides of the divide will take time to understand how the other thinks and behaves, and rather than viewing their approach as wrong will work to take advantage of the best of both characters.

You get what you pay for

One of the problems with IT being such a new profession is that it lacks formal qualifications and a standardised job hierarchy. There are however huge differences between the various IT roles, with corresponding differences in salary. Regarding all IT staff as 'support technicians' is a mistake, as that is what your IT team will end up looking like. I may trust the mechanic in my local garage to fix my car if it goes wrong, but I do not expect him to be able to design a new one.

Senior IT staff fall into two camps, management and technical. Both sides can command six-figure salaries for good positions, and can easily earn more than most law firm partners. IT Directors at this level will be able to form a key part of the firm's management with a full understanding of the business, while technical staff will be able to build and manage large and complex computer systems that run 24 hours a day, or will be software developers on business critical and revenue generating systems.

If the most senior IT person in your firm is on a similar salary to the trainee solicitors, you cannot expect them to be able to give a high level of advice about the use of IT in the business. Obviously small firms have an issue about the size and level of staff they can employ, but if skills are not in house they need to be obtained from elsewhere; if the firm is too small for a full finance director, it will make more use of outside accountants to fill the gap.

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All lawyers understand the need to keep up with changes in the law, and firms have a requirement to support their professional development. IT changes even faster, but often there is a reluctance on both sides to take this seriously. Partly this is because IT staff tend to learn in a less formal manner, often on the job, and partly because firms often see their (expensive) training investment leaving for a job elsewhere. The latter argument is actually false, as staff joining will bring knowledge in gained from training provided by previous employers. Large law firms spent a fortune on training new solicitors, knowing that many will leave immediately after and a lot more over the few years after that. The overall value is however of benefit to the firm. At an easier level to see and analyse, firms that train IT staff will see lower turnover rates which are likely to easily cover the costs of training.

More importantly, and IT department needs to be planning staff development carefully and looking at career development and succession planning. Again, this is an area where IT managers are notoriously weak, but law firms have the advantage of HR departments who are skilled in this area.

Development for the IT Manager themselves is often the hardest area, and rarely involves training in technology. Management training can often be piggy backed on training provided in other areas of the firm, with a few specialist extra courses. Another good approach is mentoring. This will often require the use of an external mentor as the relevant skills and experience are not usually available within the firm.

Finance

After staff costs, IT is usually the biggest cost to a firm, eating up several per cent of turnover. Control of costs and financial planning are therefore vital, as is the relationship between the IT manager and the finance director. All IT departments should have processes in place to manage budgets and expenses, and these should fit within the firm's wider processes. Again, this is an area where 'home grown' IT managers can be very weak, and firms need to understand this and take steps to work with them to address these issues.

Where are the admin staff?

Within a medium to large law firm, the key support departments will all have administrative staff whose role is to support the technical people in that department. Such a role will normally be called a secretary, PA or administrator, but the title may be more specific in some

areas. Where you often don't find one is in the IT department. Partly this is because IT staff know how to use computers, and can type their own documents, but usually it is a reflection of two factors: a view that IT is a low level function, and a view in IT that admin is not important. A firm with a number of IT staff, especially on that is large enough to have identified and recruited IT management as opposed to senior IT support staff, but has no provision for administrative support within the department needs to be asking why. More often than not, the IT Manager or Director will not have raised the issue or see the need. This can be an indication of issues with that person's level of skill and experience for running a department (and is most common with support staff who have moved into IT management) which needs to be addressed, hopefully through appropriate management training. Good IT managers on the other hand will immediately appreciate the difference that such a role will make.

IT sees everything

One advantage the IT department has over every other area of the firm is that they see all the processes and procedures across the whole business. As the supplier of supporting software and systems, they usually know in broad terms how every other support department functions in reality (as opposed to in theory) and also how information flows between departments, including the lawyers themselves.

Most IT staff at any level can, given the opportunity, highlight numerous inefficiencies in the way things are done. Junior technicians can be unsubtle and less than tactful when communicating this, but the senior IT staff will have a better overview of what it is possible to achieve. They will also be very aware of where technology has been used to solve a problem that should have been solved in another way, usually by changing the way things are done or addressing personnel issues.

For this reason, firms should take advantage of their IT manager as part of the wider management of the firm. To do this effectively they will obviously need to make sure that their IT manager is capable of working at such a level.

Conclusion

The IT department in a modern firm is as important to the development and long term success of that firm as finance, HR and marketing.

A good IT manager is the closest a law firm has to a general manager, in that they require the widest set of skills in finance, management and leadership. They should be helped to develop these skills, but firms should also have high expectations in these areas and not allow IT to be lead by someone who only has specialist technical knowledge.

Firms looking to make the best use of IT need to ensure that the IT manager is an integrated part of the management team, and should seek their input on decisions other than just

technology. Again, firms should expect them to be able to operate at this level effectively, and be prepared to find and pay for someone who can.

Where necessary, firms (especially smaller firms) should be prepared to use outside assistance to fill in gaps at the senior IT level in the same way that they would consult accountants and specialist lawyers.

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