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Professional Legal Management WeekSM: Total Involvement



By Marshall Fletcher

Being a professional legal manager is both rewarding and challenging. Most people outside the legal industry aren't familiar with how law firms or legal departments operate or how they are managed.

Having been a legal administrator in both a private law firm and a corporate legal department, I've observed first hand the professionalism displayed by managers in both of these environments. Since joining the legal vendor community five years ago, I have obtained an "outsider's perspective" on the professional management required and exhibited in law firms and legal departments. More importantly, I have become keenly aware of the additional component essential to an effective legal management effort – the vendor partner.

Through my participation in several legal industry associations, I have witnessed the extent to which legal management teams and their vendor partners rely heavily on each other for their ultimate success. As we prepare for Professional Legal Management WeekSM (PLMW), I would like to offer my perspective on the importance of PLMW activities within a legal organization. I would also like to suggest some ways to increase awareness in the vendor community and make vendor partners a more effective part of your collaborative team dedicated to providing the very best legal services.

Internal education – increasing your knowledge base

To be successful, the management team in any organization must comprise professionals who operate as a cohesive unit, and law firms are no exception. The effective legal organization requires the coordinated effort of the entire management team, including attorneys, paralegals, marketing, facilities, records, information technology, human resources, and administration. In large law firms, each of these groups functions independently. In smaller firms, a limited group of professionals are responsible for all of these areas.

Regardless of the size, I have visited many firms (as a vendor) where there is only vague understanding about which departments and/or individuals are responsible for different functions. In multi-office firms, there is often little shared knowledge between locations. With firm mergers and acquisitions, I suspect this is a trend that will continue. What happens if the facilities team obtains information that could prove very valuable from a marketing viewpoint but doesn't know whom to contact – a missed opportunity? Suppose a branch office implements a program that could result in significant savings if implemented firm-wide ... but no one knows whom to

inform. One of the challenges encountered in developing an effective knowledge management system is the inability to turn all the pieces of available information into knowledge. A PLMW internal educational effort in law firms can lead to a better understanding of the many different roles and responsibilities. As a result, collaborative efforts are strengthened and the knowledge base is improved.

Vendor partner education produces results

In every law firm and legal department, managers in each functional area bring to the organization the benefit of their own unique background and expertise. However, the practices of law and management in the legal environment are changing rapidly – whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. Managers are constantly challenged to stay current on new products and industry trends. This is one area where the vendor community can serve as a valuable resource for the legal management team. Vendors should be able to provide education to firm management on a broad variety of subjects, including changes in technology and emerging industry trends as well as methods to improve both the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of client service. The obvious result is that the firm is better equipped to plan for the future.

Since vendors visit numerous law firms, they can serve as extremely valuable resources. However, vendors frequently express frustration because they are unfamiliar with roles and responsibilities in law firms and legal departments, preventing them from providing information to the right members of the management team. So, it would make sense that vendor partners could be much more helpful if they had better understanding of the management team responsibilities, the day-to-day law firm operations, and how their products and services are utilized.

PLMW can be a great place to begin that education process! Why not bring in selected vendors and explain to them the various management roles and responsibilities within the firm? Provide them with an operations walk through or possibly the chance to sit in a key department for a few hours (away from confidential information).

Perhaps local chapters of selected associations (especially the PLMW co-sponsoring organizations!) could join forces to host round table discussions for vendors who wish to increase their knowledge of law firm operations and management responsibilities. Not only would this increase awareness within the vendor community, but the people from the participating organizations could also learn more about each other's responsibilities in the process.

Another suggestion is to choose an education topic like “Management Role and Responsibilities – How Legal Organizations Operate” for the October monthly chapter meeting and invite vendors to attend.

Using vendor partners for employee recruiting

There is another benefit to educating the vendor community as part of the PLMW activities. As the legal industry continues to grow, there will be an increasing demand for (and shortage of) leaders and managers in law firms and legal departments. Most vendors visit a wide variety of companies and, in the process, work with numerous managers. If vendors have good understandings of the roles and responsibilities in your law firm or legal department, they could possibly become valuable referral and recruiting sources for potential employees and future managers.

Giving back – the ultimate education opportunity

Legal management professionals face numerous challenges in their jobs. However, many people in our communities also face “life’s challenges” on a daily basis. Professional Legal Management Week and Community Challenge Weekend both occur this year early in October. This presents a unique opportunity for the entire legal industry to join together in giving back to the communities in which we live. I would like to suggest that the PLMW sponsor organizations as well as law firm and legal department legal management teams take a leadership role in bringing together members in the legal community, including legal industry vendors, in a collaborative effort to make contributions to our communities. I can’t think of a better way to display the true professionalism of all those involved in legal management!

As the industry grows and legal management responsibilities evolve, standards for an effective leader and manager continue to reach new heights. It is only fitting that we continue efforts to increase awareness, understanding, and education about the diverse responsibilities and opportunities within this industry. Professional legal managers – thanks for helping to advance this industry, and keep up the good work!

Marshall Fletcher is the Business Development Director for ALL-STATE LEGAL, one of the early vendor partners with the Legal Marketing Association and the first vendor partner with the Association of Legal Administrators (ALA). In addition to providing financial support at the local, regional, and national levels, Fletcher, a Past President of ALA, also contributes to the legal community by providing educational seminars, presentations, and published articles. Contact him at mfletcher@aslegal.com.