

Optimizing Law Firm Support Functions

V. MARY ABRAHAM



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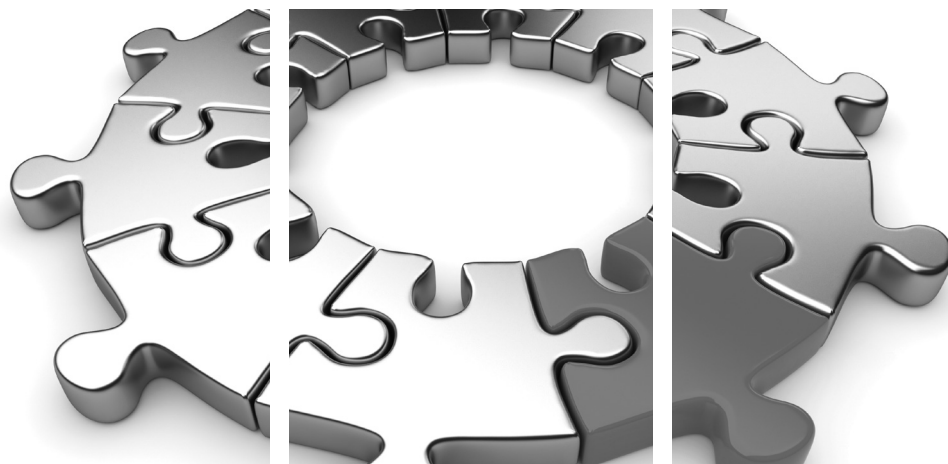
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Executive summary

HAS YOUR law firm optimized its support functions? To answer this question, you first need a good sense of what constitutes the best or most effective use of those support functions. Therein lies the rub. In many law firms, the primary focus is on increasing the value of fee-earners: how to make them more productive, how to help them generate more revenue for the firm. This goal, while challenging, is not beyond the realm of the possible since the work of those fee-earners is very familiar to the ultimate decision makers of the firm, who traditionally come from fee-earner ranks. By contrast, those decision makers rarely have the same depth of insight regarding the workings of law firm support functions. Few lawyers have toiled at the front lines of an IT department, a human resources department, or a marketing department. Fewer still have practical knowledge of how to manage an office building or ensure a reliable flow of the supplies necessary for the smooth functioning of any enterprise. While lawyers are consumers of the products and services of these support functions (and in that capacity have developed views regarding the quantity and quality of the output of these functions), many lawyers would be hard-pressed to provide detail regarding what happens behind the veil of these departments. Thus, the support functions remain slightly mysterious. Their conventions and practices may seem impenetrable until disclosed and translated for the benefit of lawyers by department heads. Often these

functions are viewed as cost centers to be tolerated for the orderly operation of the firm. Accordingly, the primary focus of the firm is to reduce the impact of support functions on the bottom line without reducing, in any material way, the quality of client services provided by the firm.

As I conducted my research for this report I asked managers in a variety of firms the following question: does your law firm expect anything of your department other than: (1) that your team avoid doing anything that gives rise to complaint; and (2) that you run your operations at or under budget? In many cases, managers shook their heads and told me that their firms understood that simply meeting those two expectations was a full-time job. In certain cases, however, not only did I get different answers, but the answers were sufficiently intriguing that they led to much longer conversations. This report contains the lessons gleaned from those conversations. In every case, these interlocutors have mastered their craft to such a degree that their departments have moved beyond mere maintenance functions to making innovative contributions that help their firms in strategically valuable ways.

This report is intended for all law firm managing partners and executive directors who want to be more strategic in the way they manage the support functions of their firms. It will help broaden your vision of what is possible, and will provide a good starting point for a strategic conversation with the managers of those support functions.

The report is also intended for managers of law firm support functions who know that their teams should be able to contribute more to the firm, but perhaps lack ready examples of what more can be achieved. This report assumes that the able manager has mastered the requirements of maintenance mode. While there may be passing references in the following chapters to what constitutes maintenance mode, the managers featured in this report generally acknowledge that achieving maintenance mode, while important for the health of the firm, is in reality no more than table stakes. To really win at this game, you and your team must help your firm move to a higher level of competence and service.

This report shows you how these managers have become strategic allies for their firms. It describes the management methods that have contributed to their success. Plus it gives examples of the projects they have undertaken that place their departments and their firms at the leading edge. From that vantage point, these departments no longer look like barely tolerated cost centers. They have become, instead, the locus of renewed energy and growth for their firms. After five years of market pressures, this is a welcome boost. In short, these managers and their departments are enormous assets for their firms. This is the power of the optimized support function.

About the author

V. MARY Abraham is a knowledge management leader and law firm consultant. In 2013 she co-founded a digital startup, Broadli Inc., which created the Broadli generosity app. She has also built a practice facilitating strategic conversations and interactive educational sessions for a variety of for-profit and non-profit organizations. Active in the legal industry for over 23 years, she practiced corporate law at a top-tier international firm and helped lead its knowledge management efforts.

Mary has served on the advisory boards of the Practical Law Company and KMers.org (an online forum for knowledge management personnel worldwide), and was a member of the conference planning committee for the International Legal Technology Association from 2009 to 2012. In 2013 she joined the faculty of Columbia University's Master of Science in Information and Knowledge Strategy program. She is a frequent speaker and writer on knowledge management, technology, and social media issues. Mary contributes to the *Law Technology Today* column sponsored by the American Bar Association's Law Practice Management Section and her blog, AboveandBeyondKM.com, continues to win commendations and readers.

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Disclaimer

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