

# Optimizing Law Firm Support Functions

V. MARY ABRAHAM



## Optimizing Law Firm Support Functions

is published by Ark Group in association with Managing Partner



### UK/EUROPE/ASIA OFFICE

Ark Conferences Ltd  
6-14 Underwood Street  
London N1 7JQ  
United Kingdom  
Tel +44 (0)207 566 5792  
Fax +44 (0)20 7324 2373  
publishing@ark-group.com

### NORTH AMERICA OFFICE

Ark Group Inc  
4408 N. Rockwood Drive  
Suite 150  
Peoria IL 61614  
United States  
Tel +1 309 495 2853  
Fax +1 309 495 2858  
publishingna@ark-group.com

### AUSTRALIA/NZ OFFICE

Ark Group Australia Pty Ltd  
Main Level  
83 Walker Street  
North Sydney NSW 2060  
Australia  
Tel +61 1300 550 662  
Fax +61 1300 550 663  
aga@arkgroupasia.com

**Online bookshop**  
[www.ark-group.com/bookshop](http://www.ark-group.com/bookshop)

**UK/Europe/Asia enquiries**  
Ken Fitzgerald  
[ken.fitzgerald@wilmington.co.uk](mailto:ken.fitzgerald@wilmington.co.uk)

**ISBN: 978-1-78358-109-2 (hard copy)**  
978-1-78358-110-8 (PDF)

**Head of Content Strategy**  
Fiona Tucker  
[fiona.tucker@ark-group.com](mailto:fiona.tucker@ark-group.com)

**US enquiries**  
Daniel Smallwood  
[dsmallwood@ark-group.com](mailto:dsmallwood@ark-group.com)

**Copyright**  
The copyright of all material appearing within this publication is reserved by the authors and Ark Conferences 2014. It may not be reproduced, duplicated or copied by any means without the prior written consent of the publisher.

**Reports Commissioning Editor**  
Fiona Tucker  
[fiona.tucker@ark-group.com](mailto:fiona.tucker@ark-group.com)

**Australia/NZ enquiries**  
Steve Oesterreich  
[aga@arkgroupasia.com](mailto:aga@arkgroupasia.com)

**ARK2763**

# Chapter 1: The challenge to optimize

SINCE 2008 law firms around the world have taken measures to respond to the upheaval in the legal market. As demand for legal services declined, firms focused on reducing costs as much as possible. Initially, some saw these cuts as temporary measures to be put in place until the storm clouds lifted. Others seized on the economic pressures as a welcome opportunity to trim the fat. Nearly six years later, however, it is clear that the bad weather is here to stay. Furthermore, many firms have cut to the bone and now have to rethink the scope of the services they reasonably can provide.

From the client's perspective, the one thing a lawyer must deliver to a client is excellent legal advice on a schedule and at a price the client finds acceptable. All other services provided by the lawyer and their firm are for convenience alone. It is completely reasonable for a client to expect that any service outside the core function of delivering legal advice will be provided at the best price the market offers – whether the provider is a law firm or a third-party vendor. Law firms that wish to provide more than bare legal advice must match or beat what is available in the wider market.

From the perspective of the law firm, things look a little different. Many firms have traditionally tried to offer one-stop shopping to clients. And, even if the service offered did not match the best the open market had to offer, there was a perceived convenience for the client when the law firm simply handled the additional services.

From the perspective of the lawyers of the firm, things get even more interesting. Here we see the lawyer's need to provide excellent client service and how that drives the lawyer to ensure that all the component services are within the control of the lawyer or their firm. To enable this approach, firms found themselves hiring personnel who were able to provide these additional services. This allowed the lawyer to produce work on incredibly short deadlines without worrying overmuch about the constraints imposed by an outside vendor.

Things are changing now. To begin with, clients are no longer always willing to accept higher prices in exchange for the proffered convenience. In fact, clients are embracing the disaggregation of legal services if it means that they can contain costs without reducing the quality of service. Accordingly, clients are pushing law firms to either meet what the market can provide or act as a general contractor to assemble a team of law firm and third-party providers who can collectively serve the client in a seamless fashion at a better price. In some cases, in-house counsel are assuming the role of general contractor and, with the help of a procurement office, are creating their own roster of preferred providers of services ranging from eDiscovery review to contract analysis and drafting.

In this context, the work of each law firm support function must be examined under a microscope. How does that support function relate to the core services the client seeks?

To what extent does the quality and price of the products and services offered by that support function compare favorably with that available in the open market?

In addition to optimizing support functions for the benefit of clients, there is the task of optimizing these functions for the health and continued prosperity of the firm. From this perspective, firm managers need to ask to what extent each support function enables the firm to meet its strategic goals, and whether the support function has the appropriate array of staff and technology to rise to the challenge. Finally, there are the tough but necessary questions relating to how the capabilities of these functions (and especially their staff) are changing and improving in order to enable the firm in turn to improve its client offerings and economic position.

### **Why optimize?**

To optimize a system or process is to make it as functional and effective as it can be. This requires a sense of what is possible and a commitment to take the action necessary to get as close to the goal of optimization as one can.

While optimization is undoubtedly a laudable goal, it is still worth asking the question: why optimize? Until now, having processes that are good enough may have been enough for some law firm managers and their firms. In fact for some, achieving a good enough standard may take the combined effort of a department's staff as currently constituted. Further, given the dislocation and anxiety of the legal market since 2008, staff may lack the inner resources necessary to imagine a better way of doing things, much less do the work required to transform that vision into reality. This means that unless a manager deliberately makes changes to working processes or personnel,

the department may not have the wherewithal to achieve optimization.

Before 2008, the existing processes did not seem to get in the way of many firms achieving economic success. The generally accepted view was that what they were doing was working, so why change? All they needed to do was more of the same. In short, firms made money, hired more staff, reached for more comprehensive levels of service delivery, and did not scrutinize too closely exactly what it took to work this way.

As we have learned since 2008, however, this steady increase in profits masked some fundamentally inefficient systems. Once the mask was removed, some firms learned to their everlasting dismay just how far from optimized their support functions really were. The results were sadly predictable: heightened employee review processes, layoffs, and hiring freezes.

The first rounds of cost cutting may have made the bankers to law firms happy, but they put serious stress on the people who were left behind. The remaining staff now faced the task of maintaining traditional service levels despite reduced headcount. No matter how heroic the staff, usually it is not possible for one person to do the work of two or three, so some things necessarily are left undone. If those omitted tasks were superfluous, then the firm is in the happy position of improved efficiency. However, eliminating staff without first examining the logic and efficacy of the underlying work processes in which they were engaged means that the shortfalls in work that inevitably occur when people are trying to "do more with less" can lead to instability in those processes. Without a properly re-engineered work process coupled with a "right-sized" work force, those things left undone are likely to be random, inconvenient, and occasionally deeply problematic.

If things were not bad enough for law firms, the fallout from the financial crisis of 2008 led some clients to be much more vocal about their expectations of their outside counsel. Suddenly it became clear that the frenetic pre-crash activity had not always entirely pleased the clients for whose benefit the firms claimed to be working. Now some clients were demanding that their outside counsel run their firms with the same kinds of business disciplines that governed the clients themselves. Above all, clients were looking for transparency and predictability with respect to the pricing of legal services. To meet these client expectations, firms now find that they have to move beyond simply discounting services to actually re-examining all parts of the firm to ensure they contribute to an efficient organization capable of meeting these client expectations.

This is where optimization steps into the picture.

### How to optimize

The path to optimization emerges from a series of strategic decisions. Before taking those decisions, a senior manager committed to optimizing a support function must answer some tough questions:

1. Does your firm management provide sufficient clarity of vision and direction so that you as a senior manager can articulate what constitutes an optimized support function within the context of your firm and its strategic plan?
2. Are you aware of the approach of optimized support functions in your firm or other firms?
3. Are you offering the right array of products and services given current client expectations and market conditions?
4. Do you have a realistic departmental plan to achieve optimization?

5. Do you have the right people?
6. Do you have appropriate technology?
7. Do you, your team, and firm management have the requisite political will to optimize your support function?

(If the answer to several of these questions is no, you will need to consider carefully whether optimization inside your firm is realistically within reach. Further, you should consider whether the better approach is to outsource some or all of your department's functions in order to provide the right mix of products and services at the right price.)

Envisioning and articulating what constitutes an optimized support function may be one of the most important responsibilities of a senior manager. As with many things, however, not all senior managers are created equal and some may not be up to the task. This is due, in part, to the fact that not all of them have been taught to see properly. What does this mean? People tend to see what they know or what makes sense given their frame of reference, and it takes guidance, self-awareness, and intentional action to overcome this cognitive bias. How does selective perception manifest itself among law firm senior managers? For example, until fairly recently it was quite usual for firms to promote from within their own ranks in order to fill senior management positions. The result was a group of senior managers who had deep institutional knowledge, along with deeply ingrained ways of doing things. Furthermore, unless they were active in professional networks, they may not have had any detailed sense of whether or how things were done differently in other firms or other industries. Given the relatively narrow ambit of their experience and limited access to alternative models, it would have been difficult for them to envision other approaches to the work they did. In this

context, optimizing the support function they managed would likely be beyond reach.

So how can a senior manager committed to optimization bring that goal within reach? It is hard to achieve that which you cannot see. Therefore, the first task is to broaden your vision. There are several ways to do this, but it begins with seeking out examples of optimized performance in your own firm and then in other firms. Further, given the insularity and conservatism of the legal industry, it would be wise to seek out examples from other industries. Once you begin looking outside the legal industry you will realize quite rapidly that there are useful ideas you can beg, borrow, or steal that are considered commonplace outside the legal industry, but are still viewed as innovative or radical inside our industry. Here lies opportunity.

Optimizing inputs and outputs is another key challenge for a senior manager. Beginning with the end in mind, is the support function in question providing the products and services that are most highly valued by the firm's clients? Have these offerings been validated recently by the client? And are these products and services being offered in a manner and at a price that the client finds acceptable?

This focus on the client is more than a matter of paying lip service. It represents a significant shift from a firm oriented towards its owners to a firm oriented towards its clients. In other words, this approach can (and should) cause the entire firm to think differently about what it does. As new models of legal service providers emerge, we are getting a clearer picture of how things can be done differently in order to deliver products and services the client values and is willing to purchase. And, we are getting a clearer picture of how far from optimized some law firms are.

Once you know what you have to deliver, the next task is to design and staff the underlying work processes in such a manner as to ensure that you provide your chosen products and services as efficiently as possible. This is hard work. It requires painstaking effort to physically map every step involved in each work process. Addleshaw Goddard in the UK reported in 2013 that they are well on their way to creating process maps of key legal processes.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, Lisa Damon (Seyfarth Shaw's head of SeyfarthLean) told the audience at an Ark legal KM conference that "Seyfarth loves to process map. We create process maps for anything that moves within the firm."<sup>2</sup> But it is the rare firm that can make the claim that Karl Chapman (Chief Executive of Riverview Law) made at the Reinvent Law NYC 2014 conference when he said that his firm had mapped *all* their processes. For him, this was the natural outgrowth of the fact that Riverview Law had the DNA of a professional outsourcer rather than the DNA of a traditional law firm.<sup>3</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, optimization most likely will involve technology and, possibly, some form of automation. Unfortunately, there are few law firms that are known for their cutting-edge technology. In fact, one senior IT manager went so far as to call the legal industry "a technology backwater." If this seems extreme, consider how Andrew Chamberlain (Head of Client Delivery at Addleshaw Goddard) described the typical law firm approach to technology:

"The legal market is traditionally conservative, and driven by short term returns. It is a market which has never undergone the continuous transformation which just about every sector of the economy has had to go through. It is a market which

has typically significantly under-invested in technology – so much so that the big technology providers have largely not bothered to target the market with sector specific solutions.”<sup>4</sup>

To be clear, optimization is not just another euphemism for “implementing more expensive technology.” It is, in fact, possible to get closer to an optimized level by engaging in systematic business improvement efforts. However, at some point it will be advisable or necessary to use technology to relieve some of the burden on your staff. Mark Chandler (general counsel of Cisco) told the audience at the Reinvent Law NYC 2014 conference that his staff tries to focus 80 per cent of their time and effort on work that gives Cisco a competitive advantage in the market. As for the remaining 20 per cent of routine work that does not yield a competitive advantage, they try to automate as much of that as possible. This requires technology.<sup>5</sup>

Once you know where you want to go, it would be wise to create a road map. This plan will help guide the daily, weekly, and monthly choices your support function makes when allocating time, energy, and attention. This plan will provide a framework for decision and action until your department has reached its goal.

The final, and perhaps most challenging, piece of the puzzle is the matter of political will. The senior managers I interviewed who seemed to have led their departments closest to optimization exhibited a strong determination to improve in material ways the quality and impact of their team. There is a great deal a single manager armed with political will can accomplish. However, when that same manager acts in concert with other senior managers of the firm, then that

firm has an opportunity to leap to an even higher level of performance. The opposite also is true. A firm led by managers who lack the political will to do the hard work required to change will find that maintaining the *status quo* will become the new goal, not optimization.

### What does optimization look like?

What does optimization look like? This is the question I put to all the senior managers I interviewed for this report. Their answers were surprisingly similar in many respects. That said, the differences they mentioned were striking and often were the by-product of a singular firm culture, the particular responsibilities of their support function, or the personal convictions of the manager in question.

To amplify this, I will discuss first some of the common points that emerged from the interviews. The next chapter focuses on optimization opportunities that seemed particular to specific support functions.

An optimized support function has the following traits:

- It understands its highest value to the firm.
- It maintains an ambitious balance between strategic and operational focus.
  - Its systems and work processes reduce the risk of emergencies, while enabling rapid response when required.
  - It invests in longer-term projects that help the firm gain and keep its competitive edge.
  - It is able to see opportunities and capitalize upon them, even in the face of constraints.
- Its emphasis on knowledge sharing and collaboration gives it influence and impact across the firm.

- It encourages a high degree of knowledge sharing.
- Its preferred approach is working collaboratively rather than creating and defending silos.
- Its drive for efficiency and collaboration means that it eschews efforts to build fiefdoms or administrative strongholds.
- Its personnel are T-shaped.
- It has healthy managers and staff.

### Case study: Highest value to the firm

*Doug Doerfler is CFO of Stinson Leonard Street LLP, a firm formed in 2014 by the merger of Stinson Morrison Hecker and Leonard, Street and Deinard – two of the leading full-service law firms in the Midwest. When I interviewed him in 2013, he was CFO of Stinson Morrison Hecker and deeply engaged in the challenge of delivering the highest value to the firm. The information reported below is based on his experience at Stinson Morrison.*

If you want to have a real and positive impact on a firm, ask in what way your support function affects the profitability of your law firm and then set out to improve that. When Doug Doerfler asked himself that question several years ago, the answer was very clear: the finance department he managed would have the greatest positive impact on the firm's profitability by shortening the billing cycle. In other words, reducing the time it takes to issue bills and then collect those bills. Having reached that conclusion, he undertook a detailed study as to what delayed the billing cycle at his firm and then set out systematically to remove or reduce each of those delays.

The first and most obvious delay was the time spent simply preparing and issuing bills. While each firm has its variants, the broad outlines of the process are similar: ensuring all the time and expenses relating to a matter have been submitted for the relevant month; creating a pro forma bill for partner review and action; and preparing a draft bill that reflects the inevitable adjustments (i.e. reassigning improperly billed time, writing down or writing off properly billed time, etc.); editing descriptions of the work done; preparing and issuing a final bill. Before this process is completed, days (if not weeks) can go by. Since a firm cannot collect on a bill until it has been received by the client, Doerfler and his team focused on reducing as much as possible the time it takes to get from the end of any given month to the time at which the bill is delivered to a client. At the time Doug and I spoke, his team consistently issued bills by the 10<sup>th</sup> day of every month.

Doerfler reports that when he tells colleagues in other firms that his team meets this 10-day goal consistently, they usually ask him how large an army of billing personnel he has at his disposal. His answer is eight. To be clear, that is eight employees out of a department of 30 people. (As noted above, Doerfler spoke to me before his firm's merger was announced. These numbers reflect the department's size at the time of our conversation.)

How is it possible to achieve this goal? The secret is in how his staff is deployed. At the beginning of every month, 26 of the 30 members of the department focus on the bills, not just the eight members of the billing function. Working together, the 26 ensure their deadline of the 10<sup>th</sup> is always met. Among other things, this means that members of the finance department, rather than a billing partner's secretary, handle all the editing of the bills (in consultation with the relevant lawyers). This reduces the hand-off time, waiting time, and turnaround time. In short, the finance department has assumed most of the burden of preparing the bills in order to speed the issuance time.



What does it take to pull off a team effort like this every month? To begin with, it requires a team. Since teams are created rather than born, this requires leadership, shared vision, and team members who are willing to roll up their sleeves to do the windows. It requires an understanding by all concerned of the benefits to the firm of optimizing the billing process. Finally, it requires deliberate practice so that staff who normally work outside the billing group are trained and able to assume the work of the billing group during those crucial first ten days of the month.

The payback for this effort is that by optimizing the billing process, they have found a way to reliably deliver positive results in their area of greatest immediate impact. This is the benefit of focusing on highest value.

### Strategic versus operational focus

Every support function has chores it must do on a regular basis. These are the tasks that allow the computing network to remain operational, the marketing events to occur, the facility to be heated or cooled as appropriate, the library resources to remain in circulation, the model documents to be updated, etc. In the course of my interviews, I asked every senior manager how they divided their time between strategic and operational work. Their answers were illuminating. Some of the managers admitted that they spent most of their time on operational matters. Frequently, they were managers in smaller firms or managers whose staff had been heavily hit by layoffs, retirements, or hiring freezes. Managers in firms of all sizes acknowledged that when their function was understaffed, they and their senior reports had to pick up the slack. In this context, the focus often was on “keeping the lights on” rather than on more future-facing activities such as engaging in research and development activities that might open up new opportunities for the department and the firm.

Several managers interviewed said that they could not always control the allocation of their time between strategic and operational matters. In an emergency, they had to focus on operational matters.

In periods of calm, they tried to focus on strategic issues. At first blush, this did not seem unreasonable. In fact, it could be considered the norm for many in a client services industry. However, this approach held their strategic efforts hostage to whatever emergency happened to crop up on a day-to-day basis. Over time, it is likely that this approach would tilt the bulk of their efforts towards operational rather than towards strategic.

In contrast, there were a few exceptional managers I interviewed who designed their department in such a way as to maximize their ability to focus on strategic matters, while ensuring that the lights stayed on. Loretta Auer (CIO of Fish Richardson) is one of these managers. In August 2011, she was awarded the Leadership Award at the International Legal Technology Association’s (ILTA) Distinguished Peer Awards Dinner. This award is given to an individual who “leads transformational and innovative change, collaborates with other leaders, and cultivates new leaders within their organization.”<sup>6</sup>

When I put the strategic versus operational challenge to Loretta Auer, her response was refreshingly clear. As the CIO, she needed to be able to focus on strategic matters. Therefore, it was critical that her team handle operational issues in

such a way as to prevent the urgent from inappropriately trumping the important. To achieve this goal, her first priority was to ensure the reliability of the IT infrastructure. As she put it: "You need to have a rock-solid operation. You should not make penny-wise pound-foolish economies with the infrastructure." To that end, she has hired a highly qualified infrastructure team that regularly identifies and carefully examines every single point of failure in their infrastructure. For each point of failure, they ensure that it is secure and that they have built in the requisite workarounds and redundancy. On top of this, they keep abreast of the constant changes in infrastructure technology and standards. According to Auer, IT infrastructure changes sufficiently frequently that no firm can safely assume that they can simply "fix it and forget it." Rather, it takes constant vigilance and care by a smart and capable team.

Thanks to the excellence of her infrastructure team, Auer is able to devote time, energy, and resources to development projects. A press release announcing the 2011 Leadership Award she received highlights some of the projects that have been possible because of the way she has tilted her department towards strategic work:

"Loretta was recognized for her creativity and vision in helping our firm to compete successfully in a continually transforming environment. Loretta has championed initiatives to improve firm wide administrative systems and staff productivity through our Best Practices and Re-Engineering/Transformation programs that will enable us to maintain/gain a competitive advantage in many areas of our practice. She has mentored and developed an information technology management staff that has accomplished projects using the best examples of emerging technologies and

development platforms in the legal industry, including Net-based reporting applications, SharePoint, Windows 7, Office 2010 and e-discovery."<sup>7</sup>

One final note: another very pragmatic CIO told me that she spends 90 per cent of her time on strategic matters. She has learned that if she gets too involved in the operational details, she becomes an obstacle or a bottleneck because she has so many competing demands on her time. Accordingly, she hires excellent managers for operational matters and lets them do their job. She focuses on providing them with strategic direction and political cover.

### **Knowledge sharing and collaboration**

In this age of plentiful information, it is not always easy to find the information you need. If law firm personnel worked on an assembly line, there would be little mystery regarding how they spent their time each workday. A law firm, however, relies on knowledge workers rather than factory workers. And these knowledge workers tend to be in offices (often behind closed doors) or in cubicles (often wearing earphones). As a result, it can be challenging for a casual observer to actually know what a colleague is working on.

Senior managers who are focused on optimization realize that poor knowledge sharing within a support function creates friction in the system. It is like a tax on every work process and interaction. What is the nature of this tax? It is the value of time wasted looking for information. It is the cost of missed opportunity due to delayed action. It is the price of frustration when personnel know that they are forced to reinvent the wheel unnecessarily.

Unfortunately, there are several barriers to knowledge sharing within an organization. Morten T. Hansen noted four

main barriers that block knowledge sharing and collaboration:

- “Not-invented-here: People are not willing to seek input from others outside their unit.
- Hoarding: People are not willing to provide information and help others when asked.
- Search problems: People are not able to find information and people easily.
- Transfer problems: People are not able to transfer complicated knowledge from one unit to another.” (Hansen, 2009, p.67)<sup>8</sup>

The challenge for senior managers is to diagnose properly which of the four barriers are present in their department and then prescribe actions that will reduce these barriers and help bring about the desired knowledge-sharing behavior. (For further guidance on specific remedial actions, see Hansen.)

While it is possible to dictate that staff members report all their activities through time records or other reporting mechanisms, this effort runs the risk of increasing the information overload without meaningfully improving knowledge sharing. Certainly lawyers have long had a love-hate relationship with their hourly billing reports. Is there any reason to believe that other law firm personnel would produce more informative (or more timely) reports?

Rather than trying to force knowledge sharing across all activities, some senior managers have targeted high-value activities and mandated a measure of knowledge sharing for those activities. For example, Shirley Crow (CIO of Farella Braun + Martel LLP) asks her staff to document all key processes and procedures on a wiki. In addition, her team does a lot of cross-

training within the department so that they never have to delay service while waiting for someone to return from a vacation.

Another way of fostering knowledge sharing is to create cross-functional teams. Doug Doerfler does this in his department when he creates teams to work on specific strategic projects. Through these cross-functional teams staff members come to appreciate the expertise and understand the perspectives of colleagues who work in other parts of the department. In addition, by working together and getting to know each other, they lay the groundwork for future collaboration and knowledge sharing. Finally, he makes these teams short-term and project-specific. When the project is completed, team members are assigned to other project teams. By this method, he is constantly mixing and blending his staff, thereby facilitating much better knowledge sharing and collaboration.

Morten Hansen makes another specific recommendation for organizations that want to foster better knowledge sharing and collaboration: cultivate T-shaped personnel. What does it mean to be T-shaped? The T-shaped person has deep competence in their area of expertise and can deliver results there (this is the vertical part of the T). The T-shaped person also has the ability to reach across and work with personnel in other units or with other expertise (the horizontal part). By being able to work vertically and horizontally, T-shaped staff are aware of resources and needs outside their own silos, are willing to request input from others (thereby overcoming the not-invented-here barrier), and they are able to assist others (thereby reducing the hoarding barrier).

By encouraging staff to leave their silos, share their knowledge, and collaborate, it is possible to reduce the friction in the system.

If done correctly, this fosters teamwork and gives staff a sense of purpose and fulfillment in their work. All of these are hallmarks of an optimized support function.

### **Healthy managers and staff**

It is impossible to have an optimized support function without an optimized staff. This raises some important questions: How can a senior manager create an environment in which staff members want to do their best work? How can a senior manager keep staff members engaged and productive? And what behaviors must a senior manager model and encourage in order to create an optimized staff?

The rot starts from the top. If the managers of support functions do not themselves have a healthy approach to work, then it is unlikely that their subordinates will. As one senior manager interviewed put it, “unless you are healthy, it is hard to run a healthy department.” And this requires more than mere physical health. It requires a focus on the humans, not just the headcount in your department. For him, it means creating an environment that “makes people want to come to work every day.” He does this by investing in the people who work for him: “I cultivate very open, supportive and nurturing relationships with my managers.” He also tries to remain extremely accessible to everyone in the department. He talks to individual staff members directly and they know that they can come to him directly. By modeling this behavior, he hopes that they will replicate those relationships with the people who work with them. In addition, he does not tolerate relationships among his team that are marked by unexpressed tension. He has learned that if left unchecked, these relationships can have a toxic effect on others. To counteract this, he tackles problems early by taking people aside and talking out the issues.

A commitment to health involves empathy and flexibility on the part of the manager. In addition to understanding what work needs to be completed by members of their team, a manager needs to understand the individual context of each team member. Another senior manager described an esteemed colleague at another firm as a person who “invests heavily in understanding her people and the pressures that are going on their lives. She gives them appropriate time to deal with crises and family concerns.” And this is where it pays to be nimble. Sometimes the individual context of a team member will make a nontraditional schedule necessary. Or, perhaps, that employee might need to work from home or bring a child to work in an emergency. Several senior managers I talked to said that, in light of constrained resources since 2008, it has become especially important to provide additional flexibility to staff members who are trying heroically to balance additional pressures at work with ongoing pressures in other parts of their lives. These managers also acknowledged that their HR colleagues were not always as enthusiastic about these flexible arrangements.

The commitment to health extends to finding and maintaining healthy approaches to work. At Lathrop & Gage LLP, their IT department allows staff members to unplug for three to five hours at a time so that they can be single-focused on a specific project. It relieves them of the fatigue of interruption. A staff member must arrange these unplugged hours in advance with her manager to ensure that there is always someone else available who can cover critical system support, and to be sure they focus on high-priority tasks during the unplugged hours. The IT department strives to allow engineers to do this at least twice each week – especially during heavy

project season (e.g. a rollout or a desktop upgrade). This arrangement has proven to be a highly productive, highly effective way of moving projects forward and giving staff professional satisfaction.

Finally, we end where we began. Any senior manager who wants to lead an optimized support function must have a clear-eyed view of themselves. As one interviewee put it: “Throw yourself into therapy, work through your stuff and develop sound personal insight into yourself and your motivations (especially the unconscious motivations)”. Managers have a disproportionate impact on the work environment of their subordinates, so managers owe it to themselves and their colleagues to strive for health.

#### References

1. Chamberlain, A., 2013. “Becoming a different legal business”. *The Lawyer*, [online] Available at: <http://www.thelawyer.com/news-and-analysis/opinion/becoming-a-different-legal-business/3006257.article>.
2. Abraham, V.M., 2011. “Seyfarth’s Success Story”. *Above and Beyond KM*, [Blog] 31 October 2011. Available at: <http://aboveandbeyondkm.com/2011/10/seyfarths-success-story-ark.html>.
3. Abraham, V.M., 2014. Reinvent Law NYC 2014 in the Rearview Mirror. *Above and Beyond KM*, [Blog] 10 February 2014. Available at: <http://aboveandbeyondkm.com/2014/02/reinvent-law-nyc-2014-in-the-rearview-mirror.html>.
4. Chamberlain, A., 2013. “Becoming a different legal business”. *The Lawyer*, [online] Available at: <http://www.thelawyer.com/news-and-analysis/opinion/becoming-a-different-legal-business/3006257.article>.
5. Abraham, V.M., 2014. “Reinvent Law NYC 2014 in the Rearview Mirror”. *Above and Beyond KM*, [Blog] 10 February 2014. Available at: <http://aboveandbeyondkm.com/2014/02/reinvent-law-nyc-2014-in-the-rearview-mirror.html>.
6. Fish & Richardson, 2011. “Loretta Auer, Fish’s CIO, wins the ‘Leadership Award’ at the International Legal Technology Association’s Distinguished Peer Awards”. [Press Release] 26 August 2011. Available at: <http://www.fr.com/ILTA-LeadershipAward/>.
7. Fish & Richardson, 2011. As above.
8. Hansen, M.T., 2009. *Collaboration: How leaders avoid the traps, create unity, and reap big results*. Boston: Harvard Business Press.