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The Fabulous, Fashionable, Focused Fractional CIO

The pressures on law firms to be state-of-the-art, secure and adaptable to technology changes are increasing.



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The IT staffs at small- and medium-sized law firms are being stretched and sometimes overwhelmed by these demands. Differences in philosophy and approach can take firms in many directions, including on-site, cloud, hybrid systems and in-house or outsourced staff.

Selecting the wrong path can have serious consequences to a firm's health. Security now sits atop of the clients' list of concerns, making it a primary issue for law firm's IT staff.

To stay on top of these demands, the head of IT has to be well-informed. He or she must be versed in security, infrastructure, applications, mobility and consumer technologies, as well as the softer side of things — education, politics, sales, mentoring/coaching, client needs and personnel management. He or she must be aware of trends and developing technology, as well as the direction key technology suppliers are headed.

This is a tall order for any one person.

A good fractional CIO can alleviate the strain on IT and bridge the gap between firm management and their technology providers.

Small- and mid-sized firms don't always have the luxury of an IT staff capable of covering the full breadth of all these options. There is only so much full-time staff a firm can realistically absorb. Plus, the volume of projects and need for high-end talent can ebb and flow. Traditional part-time help typically doesn't fit the bill. Hiring consultants is an excellent approach for individual projects, but lacks the cohesiveness and connectivity of in-house staff.

What can firm management do? How do they ensure partnership money is being spent wisely and optimally? How do they make sure internal needs are being met as well as those of the clients?

They can retain a fractional chief information officer (CIO). A good fractional CIO can alleviate the strain on IT and bridge the gap between firm management and their technology providers.

DEFINING FRACTIONAL CIO

Technopedia says a fractional CIO is “a CIO who may serve in a part-time or contracted capacity. In contrast to full-time chief information officers, these professionals will fill in as needed to help make sure that technology systems serve the essential objectives and needs of the business. In general, a CIO’s job is to manage all aspects of an enterprise IT system.”

What does a fractional CIO do? Basically, they do everything that a regular or full-time CIO does. They formulate strategy, plan and budget, set direction and prioritize, and develop processes and management controls.

They also work with the internal IT team toward continuous improvement. They counsel firm management on how to deal with IT and advise on realistic expectations from IT. Fractional CIOs also mentor the IT team.

Firms have tried many other approaches to their IT leadership. Those that don’t have the volume or complexity to keep a full-time CIO engaged can end up with a revolving door of employees.

Dividing CIO duties among multiple people often proves ineffective. Firm expectations can become misstated or misaligned and can create negativity with the partners. Meanwhile, the head of IT flounders, out of his or her depth, with no real help. A fractional CIO can address these issues, maintain continuity with the firm and — if done properly — meet the pressures on firms to provide top-rate IT to their lawyers and clients.

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