

LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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CM Feature

COMMUNICATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGEMENT

What It Takes to Succeed in the Legal Industry

Now more than ever, firms are looking for employees who possess a more diverse skill set.

Being successful in the legal industry often comes with very different requirements than other industries. It has its own blueprint for success, one that is very much tied to a unique set of metrics.



MIKE LYMER

Director, Client Services
IQ PARTNERS Inc.

“One of the keys to success in a partnership is the ability to lead through influence. Those with the ability to act with gravitas often have greater success than others who aggressively push their agenda.”

CARLYSE EVANS

Chief Operating Officer,
Toronto office, Baker
& McKenzie LLP

Legal management professionals are required to have specialized skills and a very specific and detailed knowledge of traditional law firm processes and procedures. However, as we noted in *“The Benefits & Challenges of Hiring from Outside the Legal Industry,”* things in the legal industry are changing: *Now more than ever, law firms are operating like a business, and having a “this is always how we did things in the past” approach could prevent your firm from evolving and competing in a changing landscape.*

Taking an “it worked in the past” approach today could prevent individuals from succeeding in an industry that is evolving. The things law firms are looking for in legal management professionals — finance, information technology, business development, marketing, administration, leadership — are shifting.

Firms are looking for people who possess a more diverse skill set and people who can bring something new, unique and innovative to the table — something that can give them an edge over other firms, help them better serve their clients and improve the firm’s bottom line.

This is not to say that core skills and knowledge areas should be abandoned. Being successful in law requires a very specialized core skill set, and you need to be well-versed in these skills: logic and reasoning, analytical abilities, attention to detail, persuasiveness, sound judgment, and strong oral and written communication skills. These skills are not going by the wayside any time soon.

However, they are increasingly becoming the base skill set for modern legal management professionals. This also means that if you want to make yourself a more appealing candidate, either when you are graduating from school or looking to make a career change, you need to arm yourself with skills, or success factors, to succeed in the legal industry.

KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

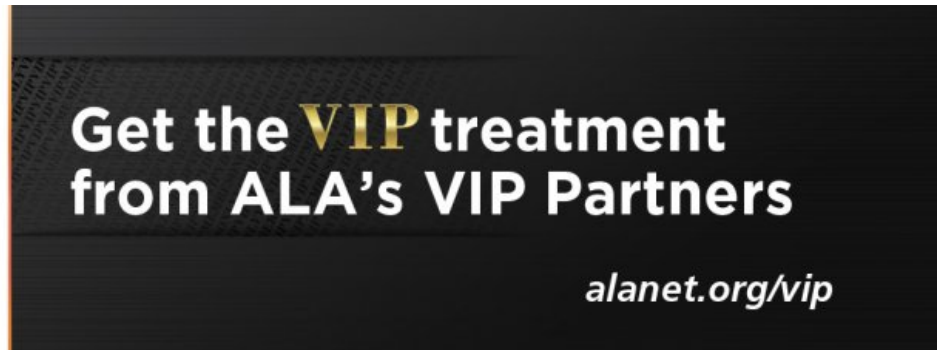


So, what are the factors that you need to succeed in the legal profession?

1. The 3 Cs: Communication, Confidence and Credibility

At the top of the list is the ability to communicate in an effective and persuasive manner. You need the ability to convey ideas clearly. You also need to be able to back up your ideas. It's no secret that language is one of the core tools of the trade, and being a master of written and oral communication will help you thrive.

Confidence is next on the list. The industry is filled with confident and experienced people — you'll have to work with them and against them. Therefore, if you want to hold your own and be taken seriously, you need to exude confidence in yourself and your abilities.



“At the end of the day, confident communication of the solution you are bringing to the table is going to be a key factor in determining your success.”

OREST SZOT

Chief Operating Officer,
Miller Thomson, LLP



“At the end of the day, confident communication of the solution you are bringing to the table is going to be a key factor in determining your success,” says Orest Szot, Chief Operating Officer (COO) at Miller Thomson, LLP. “Skepticism and the ability to judge character are two key skill sets present in a good lawyer, and if anyone wavers in the communication of their solution, it has the potential to create doubt when the plan itself might be otherwise sound.”

When you are a confident communicator, you will have the ability to build credibility in an industry where credibility can be hard to come by. It's not given out; you need to earn it.

You can earn this credibility by being pragmatic and by bringing value through innovation. Legal management professionals need to have an innate ability to look at things analytically and the capacity to present logical justifications for the solutions they are recommending. Being an effective problem solver will make you a desirable commodity.

“You can't expect instant credibility on day one,” says Szot. “However, by continuing to build relationships with lawyers and other professionals in the firm, achieving desirable outcomes is definitely possible.”

2. Being Innovative While Having a Thick Skin

People who can bring an innovative approach and new way of looking at old problems can carve a niche for themselves as the legal profession opens itself up to new ways of doing things.

But with innovation comes pushback. There will be skeptics, and you will need to be thick-skinned in order to deal with skepticism. In law, people will always question your reason for doing things, your arguments, your approach and rationale. If you take it personally, you will have a difficult time handling naysayers.

“Ultimately, perseverance plays an important role in the ability to implement innovative and

nontraditional ideas in a law firm environment,” says Carlyse Evans, COO in the Toronto office of Baker & McKenzie LLP. “Although it often requires rolling up sleeves and doing a lot of the work yourself, remaining impartial and focusing on the clients’ needs will make it much easier to overcome the skepticism and achieve the desired result.”

“Having a can-do attitude coupled with consistently asking ‘How can I help you?’ is essential in achieving goals within a firm environment.”

BLAIR LILL

Chief Operating Officer,
Singleton Urquhart LLP



3. A Business Approach to the Legal World

In a time when firms are operating on lean principles and realizing the need to operate more like a traditional business, legal professionals who can offer a more consultative style, have a detailed understanding of a corporate framework, and understand the differences between a partnership and a traditional CEO-led organization will have the ability to succeed in any legal environment.

“One of the keys to success in a partnership is the ability to lead through influence,” adds Evans. “Those with the ability to act with gravitas often have greater success than others who aggressively push their agenda.”

When you strip away its layers, the legal profession is a service-oriented industry. Your ability to serve your clients’ needs, help them overcome any issues, and create desirable customer outcomes will make you an asset to law firms from both a business and legal perspective.

“In my experience, those [who] are most successful within the operational roles at a firm are those [who] are naturally biased toward providing outstanding customer service,” says Blair Lill, COO, Singleton Urquhart LLP. “Having a can-do attitude coupled with consistently asking ‘How can I help you?’ is essential in achieving goals within a firm environment.”

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

Succeeding in the legal industry is not just about being a good legal operational professional. Having a diverse skill set is essential. Professionals who have a deep understanding of law and business and are open to new approaches in dealing with legal issues will be in high demand as the legal profession evolves.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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