



Bridging the

GAP

communicate

Legal administrators can play a major role in improving communications between their firms' lawyers and IT professionals.

BY DENNIS KENNEDY

Moving technology projects forward in law firms is not as much about hardware and software as it is about trying to get lawyers and staff in IT departments to communicate in ways both understand.

Lawyers and IT professionals almost universally agree a wide communication gap exists between them. As firms try to bridge that gap, they may find that legal administrators are the key to bringing lawyers and IT staff together. Legal administrators can play a big role in the process because they have learned, sometimes painfully, how to communicate well with members of both groups.

A QUESTION OF LANGUAGE

The gap between lawyers and IT professionals is largely language-based. Both groups are known for using jargon excessively; more precisely, both are prone to lapse into jargon when they are uncertain or nervous. Lawyers speak in jargon, but tend to use

words precisely, both in their work and in general conversation. IT professionals also tend to speak in jargon, but are not as precise with words in general conversation. However, IT people are quite precise with words within their discipline.

In both cases, the imprecise use of words may lead to statements and conversations that do not make sense. This annoys both lawyers and IT professionals, and members of both groups tend to get frustrated quickly.

Lawyers with the most helpful and effective administrative assistants and the best relations with other staff members invariably have one thing in common: They spend time explaining the whys and providing the bigger context to others. I cannot count the number of IT professionals who have told me that they wished they knew more about what lawyers did so they could implement the most useful technologies for them.

SHORTCUT

Lawyers and technology professionals often struggle to communicate effectively with each other. Legal administrators and law firm managers can play a huge role in improving those communications and bridging the gap between two vital groups of employees.

IDENTIFYING THE HURDLES

Most lawyers share three traits that make solving communications problems difficult.

1. Lawyers work very hard. Law is a high-stress profession that places huge demands on lawyers, and every lawyer develops techniques to deal with them. If a new technology project doesn't work well, they may get further behind. This disrupts their coping mechanisms, putting even more stress on them.
2. Lawyers sometimes fear technology. Although all lawyers are certainly capable of learning new technologies, the fear of technology is still common among lawyers. If nothing else, lawyers do not like to look bad or foolish if they are struggling with new technologies.
3. Lawyers, by training, are critical, yet they are comfortable working with drafts. Even if they like something, their natural reaction is to find flaws and to comment only on negative aspects. They will change their minds as they see ways to improve the final project and often will criticize exactly what they told you to do earlier, because they see it as a draft work in progress.

HOW TO BRIDGE THE GAP

Legal administrators play a unique role in this process for many reasons. First, they have already had years of experience bridging the gap between lawyers and staff and, probably, between IT departments and staff. Second, based on my experience, legal administrators can schedule mandatory meetings that lawyers actually have to attend. Third, legal administrators know how to make meetings work, from the tactical elements (making sure food and coffee are on hand) to the strategic (plotting the course of the discussion and identifying desired results or outcomes).

Here are a few tips on facilitating the communication process between lawyers and technology professionals.

1. The communication that matters most is from lawyer to IT staff. The best thing a firm can do is to help members of the IT department to understand the business of the law firm and the nature of the practice and work that lawyers do. Part of this process is to make it clear that lawyers in the same firm may do very different work. IT professionals can be surprised to learn that not all lawyers try cases. Set up a series of lunches during which lawyers talk about and answer questions about their work.
2. Conduct project reviews. The military evaluates engagements in detail after they occur to see what lessons can be learned from what went right and wrong. Law firms rarely do that with technology projects. Schedule review sessions after IT projects are completed to get lawyers and IT staff talking about what worked, what didn't and how the next project might be improved, in an objective setting.



3. Encourage regular conversations at times aside from crises. Consider this example. A lawyer waits until the last minute before printing 5,000 pages of documents due in two hours. An IT staff member calculates that, at 10 pages per minute, the task will take at least nine hours, and thus tells the lawyer it cannot be done. An argument ensues until someone intervenes and figures out a work-around. Both the lawyer and the IT professional form low opinions of each other and vow never to speak to each other again. Getting conversations to happen outside of crisis settings must be a priority to achieve higher-level communication between the two parties.

4. Take advantage of natural go-betweens. Some lawyers, especially younger ones, really "get" technology and can talk easily with IT professionals. Some IT staffers also talk easily with lawyers. Those people should be encouraged to act as "go-betweens" who can survey and communicate the wishes and concerns of each group.

5. Use food as bait. I am hesitant to draw general conclusions about groups of people, but my experience with lawyers and IT professionals is that members of both groups cannot simply pass by a conference room with free food on a table. A spread of coffee, juice, bagels and donuts to start a day will work wonders at bridging the gap between lawyers and IT staff and getting the important conversations started.

MAKING COMMUNICATION A PRIORITY


There should be no higher priority involving legal technology at law firms than getting lawyers and IT staff talking with each other on a regular, meaningful basis. Legal administrators have the best opportunity to talk in the language of both lawyers and IT professionals and bring them together.

The job, of course, is not an easy one. I recommend looking for small victories based on the ideas in this article and your own experience, and then building on them. Ultimately, the effort is well worth making. ✱

about the author

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