

Program Aims To Turn Attys Into Project Managers

By Leigh Kamping-Carder

Law360, New York (November 08, 2010) -- A new program billed as the first to certify lawyers as project managers highlights the need for attorneys to become experts at managing their firm's legal services or risk losing profits in an era of alternative fees, experts say.

The program, developed by LegalBizDev founder Jim Hassett, is designed to help lawyers communicate more effectively with clients, improve processes, reduce write-offs and protect profitability. The first group of participants, who must each have at least 10 years of law experience, will start classes Dec. 1.

Participants get between one and six months to complete the 40-hour program, which is broken down into two modules: one to review project management principles critical to the legal world and another to apply the principles to a matter from each lawyer's practice.

With the billable hour no longer king, project management skills are increasingly becoming a must-have for attorneys, experts said.

"Any skills that lawyers develop in the areas of project management can do nothing but help their practice and what they provide to their clients," said Patrick Lamb, founding partner of Valorem Law Group, a nine-partner firm that operates entirely on alternative fee arrangements. Eventually all lawyers will have to learn these skills, he added.

The need for project management expertise springs from two interrelated developments: the economic crisis and the rise of alternative fee arrangements, both of which have prompted clients to demand greater productivity and cost predictability from outside counsel.

As firms experiment with fixed fees, blended rates and performance-based rewards, effective project management will ensure they maximize profit margins, experts said.

"Once they say, 'OK, I'm going to do this for \$500,000,' the next day it is in their self-interest to make sure they meet the clients' needs and keep them satisfied for less than \$500,000," Hassett said.

In the business world, project management is nothing new, and LegalBizDev has an army of competitors, including fellow consulting firms and the field's marquee name, Project Management Institute Inc.

Seyfarth Shaw LLP opened a project management office five years ago and now has five project managers who are PMI-certified, according to Carla Goldstein, the firm's chief strategic innovations officer.



For Seyfarth attorneys, taking the LegalBizDev program wouldn't make much sense, since the firm does its own internal training, she said. But for firms without a formal approach, a project management program pared down for lawyers “can only be a good thing,” Goldstein said.

Hassett said his key selling point is to tailor the tested principles of project management to lawyers. Although setting budgets and timelines, assigning tasks, breaking down projects into small chunks, and other aspects of project management cross professional lines, law firm matters pose some unique challenges.

A host of elements — the maneuvering of opposing counsel, court calendars, client schedules and regulatory developments — are out of an attorney's control. And putting together the “products” of a law firm relies heavily on judgment.

Compare manufacturing a consumer product to writing a brief — “the idea of defining 'done,' what is complete, what is the end, is much different, and as a result the steps are much different,” Lamb said.

According to Hassett, when it comes to legal project management, law firms and their clients are looking for standards for evaluating competence in legal project management. That concept was reinforced at an event in September, when two senior partners from an international firm approached him and asked him to design a certification program for them.

The motivation was twofold: on the one hand, firms have a genuine desire to gain a deeper level of competence in project management, Hassett said. On the other hand, firms also want to prove to clients that they have the competence, he said.

“A lot of RFPs are coming out that say, 'Please tell us what you're doing about project management,’” Hasset said, “and it's very hard to come up with a good answer for that for a lot of firms.”

Certification can serve both those purposes, according to Hassett.

Even so, a client's confidence in an attorney's abilities will come from talking with him or her, Lamb said, describing the certification aspect of the program as “kind of bells and whistles,” a way to say you've done the program but not necessarily that you're any good at project management.

“It's not like you're going to go put some additional initials at the end of your name,” Lamb said.

Although certification couldn't hurt an attorney, Goldstein said, law firms should be careful about obtaining it solely for marketing purposes, without attempting to incorporate the skills into a larger approach for delivering legal services.

“For us, we don't just see this as marketing, we see this as actually doing it,” she said. “Certification isn't the end-all-and-be-all because if you're not really incorporating it into your practice, it doesn't really give you a lot.”

Hassett acknowledged that the value of the certification rests on the confidence people have in his company. But he is convinced that LegalBizDev is serving a need and that when participants master the lessons and apply them, they will see a difference at their firms. Promotional literature cautions that not everyone will pass the program.

For now, the program's success will depend on how lawyers who take the classes react, and whether they see an improvement at their firms. A verdict is still at least six months away.

