

Partnership deadwood

**How to successfully remove
partners from a law firm**

Trouble at the top

Ways to stop partners from bullying
and harassing each other

By the book

How to create a 'living' firmwide
risk management manual

Profits bullseye

How to effectively measure and
manage fee-earner performance

Quality systems

A UK law firm's experience in
obtaining ISO 9001 accreditation



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Lawyers + meetings = better practice management

Without a doubt, the single most effective means by which a law firm can improve its practice, ensure that case work is progressing appropriately, develop and maintain high quality standards and improve its risk management quotient is for its lawyers to meet regularly (in person or by telephone/video conferencing).

Why then the opposition evidenced by some lawyers to internal meetings? Some firms have structured meeting programmes which they have had for years, while others (large and small firms) have almost a phobia about internal meetings.

Would it surprise you to hear that law firms without regular meetings have more professional liability claims? That they have far less effective marketing programmes? Or that they are generally limited in their ability to grow and prosper? At some point in the life of a successful law firm entity, the issues related to regular meetings have been addressed and it has become a more efficiently-run organisation.

Developing a meetings programme

The size of the firm and its specialty should determine the manner in which the meetings programme is developed. For a smaller firm of fewer than ten to twenty lawyers, this is pretty simple. For a larger firm of hundreds of lawyers, many in different offices, the issue is more complicated.

Yet, at the heart of it, the discussions must focus on certain core practice criteria and that won't change much, although it may be handled in different ways. The purpose of regular internal meetings should be to discuss new matters, evaluate the status of case reports, review the calendar, discuss marketing issues and resolve conflicts questions. Those are the basics.

Meetings should also be designed for training, communication and case reporting. They should try to break down some of the barricades which may exist in a firm and to make lawyers feel as if they are part of a group and not on their own (as many lawyers act and feel).

These efforts are very important parts of the element of satisfaction lawyers have in their practice and help to keep a firm together in hard times.

In the case of larger firms, a sectional division of the firm by core practice groups enables each group to meet once a month as a whole by video-telephone conferencing or in person – whichever lends more focus and value to the meetings.

Many individuals may well be involved in more than one particular section, but this shouldn't mean that they can't

attend more than one meeting or that they are forbidden from attending all of them.

Ensuring meeting focus and value

The focus of internal meetings should be on transferring firm culture, communication, cross marketing and creating a more risk-adverse set of operating principles. Broadly speaking, each meeting should:

- have an agenda which is distributed the day before (if at all possible);
- be held at lunchtime or first thing in the morning so as to maximise time usage (Tuesdays, Wednesdays or Thursdays are generally best);
- last no more than 1 hour and 45 minutes; and
- be chaired by a senior-level principal who has the skills necessary to run a meeting effectively.

Materials related to the discussions at hand should be provided for each meeting. These include documents such as lists of open files and case reports by each lawyer, enabling a discussion on the progress of each matter.

Individuals who have brought in new business should discuss how and under what circumstances the new business was created. A report of client visits (past and future) should be made at the meeting.

Discussions of potential matters for which a determination has not yet been made as to whether to accept the work should be held as often as possible. These discussions are extremely important to new lawyers as well as those who have not developed a client base. The discussions are immensely helpful to the group as well as to the individuals.

Younger lawyers should be assigned the task of reporting on changes in case law which are of interest to the particular section and to provide distillations of these reports at meetings. Appropriate staff (paralegals, assistants) should also be invited to attend.

Any firm that maintains a series of meetings to accomplish practice management tasks is a far more effective and efficient entity. Firms which do not attend to these requirements are the worse for it. **mp**

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