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The Efficiency of the Attorney Experience in Your Firm's Back Office

What happens when law firms' back-office operations — unique platforms and workflow from office to office — are not standardized? It becomes an unnecessary drain on operations as well as attorneys themselves. Attorneys and staff have become more mobile and office structures have changed, so an inconsistent end-user experience when attorneys and staff move from office to office means they are directly experiencing inefficiencies.

Time is critical for attorneys. Firms of excellence drive for standardizing the back office to a firmwide experience that helps reduce attorneys' mobile friction and increase efficiency.

It means more than money in the pocket. Standardizing and streamlining back-office equipment and workflows reduces the stress of engaging new environments, learning new technology, and positively impacts confidence in increasingly displaced work styles.

The notion of a standardized back office has such a clear value to the firm in terms of dollars, efficiency gains and intangibles such as stress. It is difficult to imagine a firm not working to advance this structure; however, with the pace of change at firms — especially in terms of changing staffing structures, laterals, mergers and acquisitions — it is actually very common for even the most distinguished firms to accumulate a shocking array of back-office inefficiencies that have a wide range of negative effects.

IMPACTS OF STANDARDIZATION

Here's an example. My company worked with Philadelphia-based AmLaw 100 firm to solve this particular issue. The firm had a legacy nonstandard operation that continued as the firm grew through acquisitions of smaller, regional firms. This was a strategic decision that enabled a great deal of autonomy to each office to select equipment and service providers that best suited their own needs.

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However, over time, the resulting situation in the firm’s back office, specifically its equipment fleet, was less than desired: machines were in various states of functionality, and they had a mix of manufacturer and financial obligations. Some of the offices possessed gear that was long past life; in others, the firm was only nearing the halfway point of equipment leases. Then, in 2018, the firm acquired a larger Minneapolis-based firm that owned their equipment outright and also introduced another entirely different fleet of multifunctional devices into the mix, so something had to be done.

In total, the firm had four different equipment platforms, four different lessors and six different service providers. There was not only an unnecessary drain on operations, but attorneys themselves were also experiencing inefficiencies as they moved from office to office.

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As the firmwide strategy evolved, leadership started asking questions: Could we conduct business more effectively if each office operated the same? Could we create a firmwide experience that had tangible value for the attorneys? Could the firm gain synergies such as shared knowledge and valuable efficiencies through a firmwide experience while also creating some cost savings? We said yes.

The challenge, of course, was to create a firmwide experience in the most efficient way while ensuring excellent service across all the firm’s offices. In other words, no matter what service provider we selected, the firm wanted to ensure that their smaller offices received the same service level as their larger offices. The main players in the equipment arena were known providers to the firm and us, and the cost was fairly net-neutral after they went through the request for proposal process. It really came down to the level of service that could be provided to each office. This was the real differentiator: who, on a national level, could put together a service-level agreement that treated every office equally?

Most providers wanted to stick to uptime per office, so we assisted the firm in drilling into service levels — ultimately doubling down on the idea that we cared about all service levels on all devices in all offices. We kept pushing back that our ideal was uptime by device with a financial penalty for nonperformance. On a parallel track, the firm had strong conversations around the true needs of a piece of gear. Of course, everyone wants bells and whistles, but they really pushed people to one model of a device to capture the standardization they sought.

At the end, this process helped the firm save almost 30% on their costs. But the story is really about the efficiencies and experience created in their back office. Out of the 90 devices, they have 65 of the same device, which is almost unheard of in the legal market. This consistency also creates invaluable downstream benefits for the firm’s IT support: with all the same drivers and toners in addition to the same interface for the end users/attorneys.

As with all things, law firms should take their cues from the clients themselves. Clients no longer pay for a firm’s inefficiency — whether that’s a staffing failure or a technological failure or something else.

Client scrutiny of a firm’s excellence won’t exclude the back office forever, and the day is coming where a bill will be sent back to the firm redlined for items that are clearly caused by back-office efficiency. The firm could try to bury these objections or write them off — but that isn’t the business of an excellent firm. The business of an excellent firm is to do it right, and the back office is a vital part of this equation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rob Mattern is President and Founder of Mattern, LLC. Mattern has been widely published, including recently in the *The Wall Street Journal*, *Law Technology News* and *Legal Management* magazine, and is an editorial board member of Law Journal Newsletters’ *Accounting Financial Planning for Law Firms*.

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