

THE NATIONAL LAW REVIEW

Why We Decided to Become Certified Legal Project Managers

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On January 7, 2011, in a simple conference call, the two of us struck out upon a new venture that we believe will help us serve our clients better, and might just mark the start of a new and significant trend for law firm partners.

In a kick-off telephone conversation with consultant Jim Hassett of LegalBizDev, we plunged into an innovative program of study in the rapidly growing field of legal project management.

That conversation was the beginning of a six-month distance learning course put together by LegalBizDev that we can complete at our own pace and that leads to the title of Certified Legal Project Manager. We are among the pioneers in this, the first formal program to certify lawyers as legal project managers.

Squire, Sanders & Dempsey LLP is one of the first major legal practices to take project management to a new level. As the co-chairs of Squire Sanders' Project Management Committee, we are taking the lead in obtaining the certification ourselves and in helping to plan how to spread best practices within the firm.

What does project management have to do with lawyers? Well, pretty much everything. The world has changed, and clients need more than ever from their law firms. They want their lawyers to partner with them to achieve their business goals and deliver value, not to merely send them a monthly bill showing how many hours have been spent.

Like every other kind of business worldwide, law firms are becoming more cost-effective and efficient in providing their services. It's no secret that many users of legal services - including the corporations, governments, and nonprofits, big and small, that big law firms serve -- have perceived some disconnect between their costs for legal services and the value of those services. This trend has been building since the DuPont Legal Model was launched in the 1990s, and it was accelerated by the recent economic downturn. Even as the economy improves, however, we expect clients to continue to require greater value than ever from their law firms.

The Association of Corporate Counsel's Value Challenge is perhaps the best known of several concerted efforts by corporate counsel to improve the methods and tools that law firms use in delivering legal services. Squire Sanders has formally endorsed the Value Challenge, and adopted our own principles in the form of the Squire Sanders Partnering for Worldwide Value Covenant. Our combination with Hammonds LLP, which took effect on January 1, 2011, makes us one of a very small number of global firms that clearly articulates the importance of providing cost-effective services to our clients.

Among the principles that are integral to our covenant are that we will proactively offer our clients alternative fee structures; that we will provide budgets and estimates for each engagement and advise the client immediately if there may be material changes in cost; and that we will continuously work to become more cost-effective in the delivery of our services.

Our enrollment in legal project management certification was directly related to our value covenant. If Squire Sanders is going to live by these ambitious principles, our lawyers must understand project management and put it into practice. Unless law firms understand project management principles and put them into action, there is no



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way that they can thrive and deliver excellence while pursuing alternative fee structures and providing firmer budgets and estimates on hourly matters.

Project management is a well accepted technique in business and industry. It can be defined as the discipline of planning, organizing, securing, and managing resources to achieve a project's goals within the constraints of scope, time, and budget. We are convinced that the time has come for its careful application to major legal matters, including large transactions and significant pieces of litigation.

Lawyers will benefit from project management tools because they can improve communication with their clients and focus on clients' true needs, thereby reducing client risk and delivering greater value. Client will benefit because they can work with lawyers who put client business goals first, use creative ways to provide solutions to client challenges and ensure clients receive the best value for their investment in legal services.

There are many challenges involved in bringing the well-tested tools of project management into the legal world. For example, legal project managers must take into account client-imposed deal deadlines, due diligence requirements, opposing litigation counsel and their tactics, and deadlines and court calendars that are out of a lawyer's or law firm's control -- but we believe that these obstacles can be overcome.

In our certification program, we will do assigned readings from six leading textbooks in the field of project management and answer a series of probing essay questions. We will focus on eight key issues that lawyers must understand in order to be effective project managers: setting objectives and defining the scope of a project; identifying and scheduling activities; assigning tasks and managing a team; planning and managing a budget; assessing risks; managing quality; managing client communication and expectations; and negotiating changes of scope. All along the way we'll interact with Jim Hassett and his staff.

At a later stage of the course, we will apply project management concepts to an actual matter on our plates at Squire Sanders. For example, we might be asked to assume that the same situation would arise again but that this time the client insists on a fixed price at a lower total cost with better communication throughout. We will have to solve the problem with our new project management tools.

In that first conversation with Jim Hassett in January, we discussed Squire Sanders' position in the vanguard of this emerging area and how to maximize the benefits to our clients. In future conversations, we will discuss the most efficient ways to make project management information accessible to other members of our firm so that each lawyer can determine the best way to apply these principles in his or her own practice. We hope that the program and the certification will help our firm and our clients succeed in this rapidly changing world.

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