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Phone: +1 646 783 7100 | Fax: +1 646 783 7161 | customerservice@law360.com

6 Ways Firms Can Increase Lawyer Productivity

By **Jody Godoy**

Law360, New York (July 22, 2016, 3:04 PM ET) -- With associate pay on the rise and competition for legal work as fierce as ever, getting solid billable hours from attorneys is crucial to your firm's success. Experts say increasing productivity requires out-of-the-box thinking along with a willingness to change firmwide practices and build better internal relationships.

Traci Ray, executive director at Barran Liebman LLP and a member of the Oregon State Bar, says good relationships within a firm make everything go more smoothly, from postponing colleagues' nonurgent requests without stepping on toes to communicating quickly by email.

"Strong internal relationships are key to productivity," Ray said. "If you spend your time upfront building relationships, you spend a lot less time explaining yourself, finding help when you need it and fixing misunderstandings."

Here are six ways experts say firms can boost their attorneys' productivity.

Keep Excessive Email at Bay

A constant torrent of emails, calls and texts derail workflow, says former lawyer and business coach Cami McLaren, who works with law firms at McLaren Coaching. Firms can help attorneys better use their time by agreeing on ways to keep those distractions at bay, McLaren says.

"What slows people down a lot of the time is responding to urgencies that aren't really urgent," McLaren said.

Firms can get more work out of attorneys by letting them focus on a task for a set period of time and shut off some forms of communication — especially the pernicious pop-up windows and dings that come with emails and text messages, McLaren says.

Paul H. Burton, a time management consultant to the legal industry and principal at QuietSpacing LLC, advises firms to take that logic a step further and adhere to a uniform protocol for all internal emails.

For example, when asking someone on the team for work, attorneys can convey in the subject line of the email, including which client the request relates to, what is needed and the deadline. This saves the email recipient time wading through wordy messages or making further inquiries, Burton says.

Get the Timing Right

Rather than thinking of productivity in terms of managing time, McLaren recommends firms think in terms of managing energy, or focusing on when employees do their best work.

"That ends up being the most effective thing you can do," McLaren said, adding that attorneys who work late into the night don't always end up doing more. "You haven't really gained time. You come in later, more tired and less effective."

Studies have shown that, contrary to common practice at law firms, people are less productive when they work through breaks and lunches, McLaren says. She recommends that firms foster a culture that allows attorneys to build short breaks into their work hours.

"It requires making conscious choices," McLaren said. "If the firm can say, 'We support breaks, we support you going for a walk,' it is much more effective than saying, 'Don't ever go on Facebook.'"

Strengthen the Weak Links

In searching for productivity, firms need to make sure all their lawyers are pulling their weight — and if not, find out what is wrong. Michelle Cotter Richards, a law firm consultant at Rainmaking Oasis LLC and former BigLaw litigator, says handling situations in which attorneys are underutilized can be a challenge.

By analyzing the time the firm bills for a task as a percentage of the time it actually took — and accounting for factors that affect particular practice groups — firms may find attorneys who spend too much time on tasks, Richards says.

"If you are seeing associates where this is repeatedly an issue, it's worth talking to them and seeing what's going on," Richards said. "The vast majority need to be redeployed or trained."

Firms need not tackle all areas at once, but can start with a smaller practice group and perfect methods for working with underutilized attorneys as they scale up to work on larger groups, Richards advises.

Let Employees Do What They Do — and Like — Best

People work better when they are in roles they like and are good at, and those factors should be part of the discussion with an underperforming attorney, Richards says.

Recruiting talent that fits the firm's needs is something most firms do, but in order to optimize workflow, it's a good idea to talk with attorneys, especially midlevel associates, to find out their goals and preferences. Uncovering those leanings doesn't take a complicated metric, but can instead be part of a more robust yearly review process, Richards says.

Experimenting with ways to leverage attorneys' strengths can raise productivity, but it also plays a role in attracting younger lawyers, who are more focused **on work-life balance**, and helping **prevent substance abuse**, Richards says.

"I think it's a win-win. It helps the bottom line and it helps the individual," Richards said.

Hire Competent Staff — and Trust Them

Ray noted that another crucial piece to the productivity puzzle is hiring great staff, especially assistants, who allow attorneys to focus on legal work. The best assistants know what they are doing, are highly trainable and have positive attitudes, Ray says.

"When you have a fantastic assistant, you become much more productive. You can rely on them to do the things that need to be done very well but don't necessarily need your touch," Ray said.

Ray adds that with the help of other nonbilling professionals, her firm has cut down on unnecessary committees, which can also sap productivity. Anything in a business setting can be the subject of a committee, from sustainability practices to marketing to choosing artwork for the office. Once the firm sets priorities in those areas, it's best to let nonlegal talent to carry out the day-to-day work without involving lawyers, Ray says.

"We made a commitment to one another that if it wasn't client- or law-related, we needed to really ask: Do we have the right person making those decisions? And if we don't, let's find them and trust their judgment," Ray said.

Make Meetings Count

Meetings can convey important information and get people on the same page — or they can eat up billable hours.

Ray often schedules meetings for breakfast or lunch and says creating itemized schedules for every meeting, and sticking to them, is essential to preserving attorneys' work time.

"Every single lawyer is missing billable time when they are sitting in a meeting," Ray said, adding that it can be helpful to remind people of that fact if they are prone to make meetings run over.

And it is not just official meetings that can drain time — informal one-on-ones can be problematic as well. While partners play an important role in helping shape an associates' practice, having an "open door" policy can lead to a barrage of interruptions, McLaren says.

The co-author of "Coaching for Attorneys: Improving Productivity and Achieving Balance" instead recommends setting aside a time to address a specific associate's needs and concerns all at once.

--Editing by Patricia K. Cole and Katherine Rautenberg.

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