

LAWYERS JOURNAL

L A W P R A C T I C E M A N A G E M E N T

Small law firm innovations come from the most unlikely places

By Mark Haddad

Not all innovative ideas come from the places we would necessarily expect, and small law firm leaders would be wise to keep that in mind.

I've written previously about lessons that can be learned from business professionals tasked with leading law firms toward a more profitable future. These professionals bring fresh perspectives and different ideas to the business of law, helping the law firms they serve find new and innovative ways to run their businesses.

But smaller law firms may not have these sorts of dedicated professionals on staff. That is not, however, to suggest that small law firms do not have a plethora of sources for potentially innovative ideas.

I've also written in the past about how small law firms need to wisely manage their resources with particular focus on their human capital and other resources. In a prior article, I wrote about the need to assure that matters are being staffed by appropriate resources at the appropriate level. But properly managing human resources at a law firm is not limited simply to the question of how matters are staffed or who completes what task. It also means empowering law firm staff to drive the law firm forward toward a more successful future.

As we look at the results of the Small Law Firm Business Leaders Report, we see that these business leaders are tasked with a wide variety of jobs, and generally feel supported and empowered to drive what they view as needed change within their law firms. However, they are less convinced the partners at their firms are truly committed to changing the way legal services are delivered to clients.

While 85% of small law firm business leaders agreed with the statement that they are empowered to drive change within their firms; only 21% agreed that there is a strong commitment to changing legal service delivery among the partners. This partial disconnect is further reinforced – fully 57% of law firm of small law firm business leaders disagree with the latter statement.

Think about this in the context of your own firm. Would you consider your partners or even yourself to be strongly committed to the idea of changing how you deliver legal services to your clients, even if your clients have not specifically



Mark Haddad

requested certain changes? How have you demonstrated that commitment?

And perhaps the more difficult question to answer is this: How do you think your staff would answer those questions?

That is, do you think your staff would agree that you're committed to change? Have you given them reason to believe that you would take their ideas and put them into practice if it was truly in the best interest of your clients? Finally, do you think your staff would agree that they are empowered to drive change within your firm?

I'm afraid that many firms get stuck into the rut of "this is how we've always done it" and fail to look for new and innovative ways to solve problems for their clients. This is, regrettably, part of our nature as human beings, and it penetrates where and how we work. At the same time, even those firms that are interested in trying new things on behalf of their clients may limit the sources of those ideas to their attorneys. In a small law firm with a limited number of people, however, this could greatly restrict the pool of potential ideas to a very small number of people.

And not all good ideas come from the places we would necessarily expect.

For example, would you believe that we would not have landed on the moon, except for one person who took a leap and went around the chain of command to advocate for an idea? In 1961, a NASA engineer by the name of John Houbolt sent a letter to NASA administrators advocating for a moon landing strategy known as "lunar orbit rendezvous." This concept was one of three potential moon-landing strategies under consideration by NASA at the time and was considered the least likely of the three to actually be used. However, less than a year later – thanks in large part to Houbolt's advocacy – the lunar orbit rendezvous strategy was adopted by NASA as the means for landing a man on the moon.

Had Houbolt not circumvented the usual pathways and had NASA's leadership not been open to considering ideas that came outside of the usual chain of command, NASA may have invested years pursuing a strategy that would ultimately not be effective for landing a man on the moon. And this unbelievable event would likewise not have catalyzed a wave of innovation, growth, and success that literally spanned the globe.

In the letter he sent to NASA administrators, Houbolt described himself as "a voice in the wilderness."

Let's turn our attention back to your own law firm. Do you have a "voice in the wilderness"? Or to put it another way, would your staff feel comfortable raising their voices to advocate for new and different pathways to the correct answer? Further, do the people who work for you feel empowered to help drive change and believe that you are committed to making the changes necessary to better serve your clients?

These are, without a doubt, difficult questions.

So, what kind of changes are you open to? Meaningful change might mean adopting new technologies, examining your present workflows for inefficiencies, stepping away from long-held concepts of how lawyers are supposed to work and bill for their time, or changing how you present your law firm to the public in terms of your brand and marketing voice.

Whatever changes are needed to best position your law firm for future profitability, take time to consider opinions that you maybe have not examined before. That could be articles that you read online. It could be lessons that you learned from leaders of law firms that the same size or potentially even larger than your own firm. Or, it could be tapping into the wisdom and experience of the staff already working within your firm.

The truth is, we don't know where the right answers will come from. But we must create a real and open forum for them to exist, listen when they emerge, and take action when they drive the change and vision on which you are focused. ■

Mark Haddad has spent the last 17 years of his career at Thomson Reuters, and currently serves as the General Manager of the Small Law Firm business within TR's Legal business. This article has been republished by permission of the Thomson Reuters Institute at <https://tmsnrt.rs/3rQWFaZ>.