

Come Together, Right Now – p. 1

by Al Podboy

Web 2.0 tools—such as wikis, blogs, text/instant messaging, social/collaboration networking, and virtual life—add another level of collegiality to the law firm as they expand openness and foster cooperation.

Improving Law Firm Performance Through Enhanced Internal and External Financial Analysis – p. 4

by Linda Will and William Scarbrough

Training a New Generation of Lawyers – p. 6

by Robert M. Galford and Anne S. Drapeau

The Synergy Between Knowledge Management and Professional Development – p. 8

by Lisa Keller Gianakos

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Legal Environment*

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AT A GLANCE: Web 2.0 tools—such as wikis, blogs, text/instant messaging, social/collaboration networking, and virtual life—add another level of collegiality to the law firm as they expand openness and foster cooperation.

By **Al Podboy**, Director of Libraries, Baker & Hostetler L.L.P., Cleveland, OH

Come Together, Right Now

“Built on an intranet platform in a local law firm network, [Web 2.0 tools] add another level of global reach with significant opportunities for law firm control.”

The Internet is communication, connecting, and collaboration. It is a 24/7/365 environment that brings together a global community. Web 2.0 has enhanced the Internet. It is not a new and improved Internet, but rather reflects how we look at and use the World Wide Web. Web 2.0 changed the Internet by not only encouraging the use of electronic resources, but by stimulating their creation. By encouraging the user to create resources, Web 2.0 is leading to the development of more collaborative tools—tools with enormous possibilities, but also a few concerns. These collaborative tools include social networking services, text/instant messaging (IM), wikis, blogs, and virtual communities. The creation of these tools is the most important recent Internet development. How law firms will use these collaborative tools is still to be seen.

Law firms are collaborative environments. Collaboration is the heart of what they do. *Webster's Third International Dictionary* (1986) defines collaborate as: “to work jointly, especially with one or a limited number of others in a project involving composition or research to be jointly credited.” Law firm work product utilizes collaboration with every document, filing, memorandum, brief, or transaction produced. Although the work product may be signed by a responsible individual, it is often a project created by collaborative effort. Web 2.0 tools offer additional opportunities for collaboration. These

continued on page 2

tools augment, but do not replace, the law firm's traditional group effort. The collaborative tools discussed here will remain only a small part of a collaborator's day. Their value cannot be measured by the amount of time they are used, but by the improved quality of the final work product.

Web 2.0 collaborative tools may be either public or private. Their content includes text, images, audio, video, news, education, mobile, and virtual information. The tools include social networks, wikis, blogs, text/IM, aggregators, podcasts, and virtual life.

The public Internet versions of these tools have been very successful because they are easy to use and give free open range access. Free open range space has few or no rules fencing the user in. But that free open range access poses a number of privacy and control issues for law firms. The successful public Internet collaboration tools have no or very limited security and accountability. They exist with very limited moderator oversight of created content. They are often self-governed and suffer from potential leaking of information. They are, however, a potentially terrific resource. The public collaboration tools now enable individuals to market themselves either in a professional or social arena. The public collaboration tools are hugely successful but, because of privacy and control issues, remain difficult to utilize in a private law firm environment.

Private intranet versions of these public collaboration tools, however, offer significant, secure collaboration opportunities. Built on an intranet platform in a local law firm network, they add another level of global reach with significant opportunities for law firm control. Intranet-based collaboration tools offer the opportunity for security, accountability, and a controlled, moderated membership. Intranet-based collaborative tools provide opportunities for users to



share skills and expertise with minimized privacy and confidentiality risk. Successful implementation of these tools, however, still requires ease of use. If the tools have a long learning curve or require sustained active participation, their use will be severely limited.

Wiki

One of the earliest Internet-based collaborative tools was the wiki. A wiki is a collaborative tool that allows users to create, edit, and organize content. On an intranet-based platform, a wiki can have limited access and be member defined. A wiki is relatively easy to use. As an addition to a law firm's existing content management services, a wiki may be useful in drafting collaborative documents. A wiki moderated by a senior associate can also be a useful training tool in associate development. The wiki offers another venue for interaction between law firm members in a potentially non-threatening interoffice or intra-office environment.

Blog

Similarly, a blog is a relatively older, yet useful, collaborative training tool in a closed environment. Blog is a contraction of Web log. The blog started its existence as individual posts on the Web in the form of public journals or logs. A blog is an easy tool to use, but very labor-intensive. A successful blog requires a significant amount of the lead contributor/author/blogger's time. Nevertheless, it does offer another collaborative law firm intranet opportunity. On a



blog, individuals can discuss issues, policies, and procedures in a variety of scenarios. The lead blogger's published articles or documents are open for registered members' comments and discussion. The exchange of ideas on a blog can be remarkable.

Text/Instant Messaging

Text/instant messaging is an often-overlooked collaborative tool. Texting via mobile phone or personal computer allows semiprivate, person-to-person communication in a public setting. Text/IM exists in the world between e-mail and the telephone. It gives the text author the ability to privately communicate in plain sight. Such communication can further collaboration in an appropriate setting. The text author can solicit advice and information by texting during an ongoing negotiation or trial on a real-time basis. In the heat of a negotiation or trial, this may require a second chair colleague to do the actual texting. Obviously, such text/IM collaboration must also meet all requirements of the specific venue, such as court rules and limitations imposed by and between counsel.

Social/Collaboration Networking

Historically, relationship building has been a huge law firm investment. This includes relationships between the attorney/client and within the law firm family. Law firms have invested heavily in retreats, meetings, speeches, programs, meals, and athletic events.

Firms have long kept detailed personal and electronic records of these activities. Web 2.0 social/collaboration networking services will not replace these efforts. They will, however, build on their foundation. All social networking services build communities of people who share similar interests, desires, and goals. All systems, whether in person or social electronic network relationship building, depend on the users' desire to contribute. If the users do

not recognize the value of social collaboration, the activity will fail. They must also be private and easy to use.

One example of such a service is Contact Networks. Contact Networks is an enterprise relationship management solution. It is an easy-to-use tool that identifies relationships between individuals and automatically harvests and analyzes multiple data sources. The sources harvested include: e-mail, electronic calendars, client relationship management systems, marketing databases, human resources databases, and time/billing systems. The tool captures the information from the above resources but retains ownership, privacy, and control within the law firm. It does not require any hands-on user input. It automatically mines the relationship data of law firm members. This collaborative/social network tool analyzes the data and determines who knows whom and how well they know them. It ranks the relationship by strength and not alphabetically. The tool gives the law firm the ability to harvest the information, but it remains up to the firm to determine whether it should. The law firm must sell buy-in to its users. If the law firm members do not agree with the concept and goal, the law firm risks upsetting its rainmakers. Personal relationships are, after all, at the heart of an individual attorney's practice. Thus, everyone must recognize the value of any social network tool for its implementation to be successful.

continued on page 11



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Improving Law Firm Enhanced Internal and

INTERNAL

Enhanced Internal Financial Analysis

In today's competitive legal market, the law firms that perform best financially will be those that apply fundamental business principals most effectively to their legal practice and management. All businesses, including law firms, look to add and expand revenue streams from the highest-end clients able to purchase their services. It is not enough in these very competitive and tough economic times to reduce costs and maximize core services. The law firms of the 21st century must be strategic in their business practices and goals. According to Steve Petrie, manager of Strategic Operations and Financial Analysis at Dorsey & Whitney LLP, there are three steps, or levels, for strategic-minded organizations to increase profitability and maintain their market share: reporting, analysis, and synthesis.

At the foundation of law firm analysis is basic reporting, where financial staff are report writers and offer very little interpretation or analysis. They serve as monitors, whose focus is centered on maintaining the underlying data of the

firm and managing internal systems. This financial service function, emphasizing technology and internal data systems, is certainly important and often adequate for small law firms.

The next level of financial service is reached when reports are more tailored and the analysts actually determine which data elements are most meaningful to firm administration. Not only is information managed, it is interpreted in an effort to identify key trends and to monitor the competition. At this level, analysts are assigned specific office locations or practice groups, providing attorneys with a single point of contact for support. Their analysis may impact lateral recruitment and support new industries where a law firm can grow its business.

The most sophisticated law firms will take analysis to the next stage, that of synthesis, where, according to Petrie, analysts are "expected to apply quantitative and qualitative analysis directly to the critical business decisions of the firm." This stage

requires regular interaction with senior management, and may be responsible for competitive intelligence relating to pre-merger prospects, due diligence during a merger discussion, evaluation of an office expansion, or legal or administrative outsourcing possibilities. At this level, analysts are encouraged to question the status quo again and again, and to rethink traditional ways of doing things. Innovation is encouraged as a means of accomplishing financial goals. Analysts do not just report and distill information; they strive to reinvent traditional law firm modes of management. A top-notch analyst team can foster organizational collaboration, connecting departments with one another and bringing together firm knowledge to attain firm goals. Strategic initiatives are a combination of internal elements such as practice breadth, geographic scope, and firm culture, as well as the external elements of monitoring competing firms, creating pricing models and initiating cost reduction programs.

Performance Through External Financial Analysis



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External Analysis for Reducing Third-Party Expenses

EXTERNAL

Law firms are increasingly augmenting their internal financial analysis capabilities with outside accountants, consultants, and competitive intelligence providers. One of the most interesting trends over the past few years has been law firm use of specialized consultants to find ways of reducing third-party expenses, generally on a contingent fee basis. Because of the popularity of this approach for law firms, the number of such consultants focusing on the legal industry has proliferated. A few such providers are mentioned here as examples, with no intention of excluding others.

Kairos Group

The Kairos Group, Inc., based in Rockford, Ill., focuses on helping law firms evaluate their telecommunication providers and expenses to find ways of consolidating and reducing those expenses. Kairos has been in operation for 15 years and now serves a wide variety of companies and industries. Telecommunication costs, though falling over recent years through deregulation, increased competition, and technology convergence, still represent a very significant portion of law firm technology budgets. Unlike new technology deployments, where added value and efficiencies can be achieved, telecommunication costs

tend to be operational and ongoing. Telecommunication expenses include local telephone service, long distance service, private data networking, high-speed Internet connections, and wireless/cellular capabilities. The emphasis here is not on internal voice and data network infrastructure but rather on outside service providers. As with the other consultants included in this summary, Kairos generally charges its clients a fee as a percentage of the amount of money saved through its efforts. Once the new, negotiated arrangements recommended by Kairos are implemented and monthly invoiced costs from the telecommunication vendor(s) have been reduced, a percentage of the savings is paid to Kairos on some periodic basis. The net effect is reduced cost overall to the firm. Given the financial structure and cash basis of most law firms, this contingency fee approach and gradual payment of the consulting fee hold great appeal.

Hildebrandt

Hildebrandt International, with offices in many of the major legal markets (e.g., New York, Washington, London, Chicago, San Francisco), has been a major consultant to law firms, corporate legal departments, and other professional

service firms for many years. Hildebrandt works primarily with large law firms, providing high-level, high-value, strategic advice. As part of its broad menu of services to clients, Hildebrandt has added a contingent fee cost reduction group (“Strategic Sourcing and Cost Optimization”) more recently. Hildebrandt can look at a variety of services and products law firms consume (from photocopy equipment to office supplies to off-site records storage to many others) to help arrive at the most efficient mix of vendors and services at the best price. As with Kairos, Hildebrandt’s work in this area tends to be compensated on a contingent fee basis as a percentage of savings to the law firm and its clients.

Altman Weil

Altman Weil, Inc., is based in Milwaukee and Philadelphia and serves law firms across the United States and, increasingly, outside the United States. Altman Weil provides a wide range of high-quality consulting services, similar to many of those offered by Hildebrandt, to large and medium-sized law firms. Like Hildebrandt, Altman can assist law firms in evaluating third-party vendors and services, and in finding ways to reduce the cost of those services on a contingent fee basis.

continued on page 11



AT A GLANCE: Here are the five essential ingredients of making law firm training more engaging, more effective, and more enduring to the new generation. The good news is you can do it.

By Robert M. Galford and Anne S. Drapeau,
Managing Partners, The Center for Leading Organizations, Concord, MA

Unless you are deeply immersed in social science debates, you may have missed some of a controversy that is currently taking place. There has been much back-and-forth on the question of whether the current generation of 20-somethings is more narcissistic than preceding ones. Are they so deeply focused on themselves, their fame, and their self-image that they have little interest in forging longer-term relationships with organizations or institutions unless those entities nurture their deep personal needs and cater heavily to building their self-esteem?

Training A New Generation of Lawyers

Kids! What's the matter with kids today?

Why can't they be like we were, perfect in every way?

What's the matter with kids today?

Bye Bye Birdie, Tony-winning Broadway musical

Having examined that issue as part of the research for this article, we have three headlines that answer that question: One, it's not clear. Two, we may never find out. And three, it really doesn't matter. Regardless of whether this latest generation (sometimes referred to as the Millennials, in coming of age after the year 2000) now entering the profession is more (or less) selfish, self-obsessed, or anything else is beside the point. The point is, quite simply, they are different.

Whatever the cause or causes of that difference may be (and popular culprits include their baby boomer parents, the Internet, technology, Paris Hilton, the self-esteem movement, or all of the above), it requires a shift in how we formulate and deliver training in order to ensure greater attachment to a particular skill set, a particular firm, and the profession itself. Members of the new generation, whether they are already in your firm or are about to join, are not only used to, but actually demand an approach to learning that reflects the world in which they have grown up, learned, and interacted with society at large.

On this topic, however, there is good news to report. Having spent a fair amount of time with these young professionals, and even more time with their not-so-young law firms, we have identified what we consider to be the five essential ingredients of making training more engaging, more effective, and more enduring to the population at hand. The even better news is that these five elements are, for the most part, within the reach of each of you reading this on behalf of your firms. Here are the five ingredients on which effective new-generation training is built:

1. Immediacy. Quite fittingly, immediacy comes first. Immediacy comes first in the sense of only training people on topics just as they are needed. Particularly in the early stages of the legal career, there is much more to sort through, much more to learn, and even much more to do. There has been far too much “this is what we give to the first years, or the fifth years,” or whatever, without asking: “Is this really what this person needs right now?” In the better places, topics are carefully vetted, and people are not asked to go to any program that isn’t relevant to their work in the next two or (at most) three months. None of this “it’ll be good for you to learn this; it’ll come in handy some day” kind of reasoning.

2. Brevity. Once upon a time, programs would be days long. Sessions could last a half-day. Fuhgeddaboutit. Unless you are doing a very cool, fully-integrated, one-day, skill-building session requiring lots of up-front planning, with simulations, and trained actors or partners playing client or adversarial roles, it’s got to be short. I recommend two hours or less. Yup. That’s it. If you’ve got lots to convey, fine. Just don’t try to do very much of it at once. After all, in most of their lives, music videos and songs are five minutes or less, favorite TV shows are a half-hour long, and when was the last time they watched a movie longer than 90 minutes?

3. Open, two-way flow, in content and process. Straight lecture? Unless it verges on meaningful “edu-tainment,” it’s deadly. You can’t simply tell an opening joke, deliver the lecture or show your slides, and then ask if there are any questions at the end. This population interacts with everything one way or another, doing so on an ongoing, if not continuous basis. Elementary schools have classroom versions of Audience Response Systems. As students and as adults, they have posted comments on each other’s Facebook walls, ranked their professors at ratemyprofessors.com, and read blogs and submitted feedback on much of what they do. They expect their “you need to know this” information readily accessible, and they expect (and you should provide) easy ways to participate in the learning. That means giving them question templates, things they should ask, and ways of asking it, and when sessions are over, forums, follow-ups, and outreach. Copies of slides, an articles list, and a set of Web sites to access don’t come close to scratching the surface.

**“The key ...
lies in the
quality of the
instruction. ...”**



AT A GLANCE: Why are so many firms unable to parlay their Knowledge Management (KM) programs into Professional Development (PD) programs? And how can Web 2.0 help?


By Lisa Keller Gianakos, Director of Knowledge Management, Reed Smith, L.L.P., Washington, D.C.

The Synergy Between Knowledge Management

There is a natural intersection between knowledge management (KM) and professional development (PD) programs. In some ways, KM is a prerequisite to a comprehensive learning curriculum. While you can have a PD program without top-notch KM, the likelihood of it being truly comprehensive and superior is greatly diminished. The whole point of KM is to ensure that members can benefit and learn from the firm's collective knowledge. So, why are so many firms unable to parlay their KM programs into PD programs? And how can Web 2.0 help?

The Intersection

A good learning program requires content—much of which can be derived from KM programs and technologies. In *Turbo-Charging Lawyer Performance*, Chris Boyd and Mara Nickerson explain that PD can help with skills like public speaking, supervision, business development, and matter management. KM can provide the tools required by the lawyer at the point of service delivery, such as model and sample work product, past matter profiles, and expertise profiles. Both foci “help lawyers become as effective and efficient as possible, as well as increasing the overall quality of the firm’s legal services and reducing malpractice risk. ... [T]he immediate utility of KM resources can mitigate traditional PD’s lack of immediate relevance, while professional development’s power to strengthen skills and permanently change behavior can mitigate KM’s impermanence.” Whether it’s getting a junior associate up to speed on a new deal type, integrating lateral mid-level associates into the firm, or institutionalizing relationships, a strong KM program can foster a strong PD program.¹



If it's so obvious that KM can bolster a more effective professional development program, why aren't more firms doing it? Many KM programs focus heavily on technology. These technology-oriented solutions are successful because they don't require massive attorney time to get up

Professional Development

and running, or to sustain over time. But the kinds of know-how professional development programs seek to cover require procedural knowledge and other tacit information, which cannot be easily extracted through technology. There is no technology that can analyze existing deal data and present a checklist of all of the items one would need to address for a future similar deal. Technology can help some, but it doesn't get to the cream-of-the-crop type of information that a professional development and mentoring program could provide. For instance, West km® for Transactions can analyze a deal and build an automatic document summary, including a list of all of the other documents that are referenced within. So, if

you found a good example of a merger agreement, you would to some extent have a blueprint for a future deal, but it is far from complete. It doesn't include all of the what ifs or conditional scenarios that need to be considered. Document assembly technologies, on the other hand, can be much more complete, covering 90 percent or more of all of the possible scenarios a merger would cover. But again, many firms haven't successfully deployed document assembly tools because such technology requires a ton of attorney

time to build solutions. Even the best document assembly program, from a technology and ease-of-use standpoint, doesn't overcome the fact that it still requires attorneys to sit down and codify all of the experience and know-how that is in their heads. Even the best KM programs today only go so far in supporting PD and will probably never replace the need for one-on-one mentoring, the most expensive form of training, yet considered by many to be the best.

Perfection Not Required

Another roadblock to both KM and PD programs is the concept that content must be highly vetted prior to being shared. This is beginning to change as more and more people adopt social technologies like blogs and

continued on page 10

The Synergy Between Knowledge Management and Professional Development

continued from page 9

wikis where “something is better than nothing” is often the theme. This idea is presented in Michael Idinopulos’ blog on social software in the enterprise. In his “Work-in-Progress Culture” post he says,

The real paradigm shift in Web 2.0, I believe, is the blurring the line between publication and collaboration. In the old days, people collaborated in private. They talked to their friends and colleagues, wrote letters. Later they sent emails. All the real thinking happened in those private conversations. Eventually, once the key insights had been extracted, refined, and clarified, they published: books, articles, speeches, blast memos, etc.

To me, the really exciting thing that’s happening in Web 2.0 and Enterprise 2.0 is that more and more of those private “pre-publication” interactions are happening in public (or at least semi-public). I think of this as the dawn of the “Work-in-Progress” culture. We no longer think that something has to be finished before we let strangers into the conversation.²

If a practice area adopted a wiki to document how to execute a certain type of deal, wouldn’t it be better if some steps were initially identified, as long as it was clear to the initiate that it is just a starting point, and that they still need to work with an experienced partner to get the complete picture? From an associate point of view, wouldn’t they feel somewhat empowered to at least have a starting point? Wouldn’t they prefer to be able to go to a partner and say, “OK, I am aware of these issues we’ll have to address, but

“[T]he younger generation is comfortable with these Web 2.0 tools and will expect to use them at work too.”

I’m sure there is more to it than that. What else do I need to know?” An associate could later update the wiki with what he learned via face-to-face mentoring; the wiki would improve over time as each associate expanded and refined it. Wouldn’t that be better than waiting for perfection to present information? Reverend Robert H. Schuller’s quote “Better to do something imperfectly than to do nothing flawlessly,” is quite apropos to Web 2.0!

Idinopulos also refers to Gerry McKiernan’s post on Science 2.0 that says working in this manner “is not only more collegial than the traditional variety, but considerably more productive.” He says that Web 2.0 is “the most powerful tool ever invented for correcting mistakes, building on colleagues’ work and creating new knowledge.”³

The New Generation of Knowledge Workers

Nowadays many firms have e-learning systems and have adopted blended learning methods offering more flexibility in when and how training is received depending on the subject, the audience, and individual preferences. The important lesson here is that the younger generation is comfortable with these Web 2.0 tools and will expect to use them at work too. Sun Microsystems recently launched

an on-boarding site aimed at new and prospective hires that includes competitive gaming, user profiles, and tag clouds. Karie Willyerd, chief learning officer says, “We know that most of our new hires are digital natives. This is an environment most of them are comfortable with. Not only do we have live training and e-learning, but we also have this kind of site to make learning a process and create a social network around that.”⁴

Law firms need to recognize the changing styles of communication and learning that their future partners are using, and begin adapting both their KM and PD programs to accommodate this, or risk being seen as stodgy and technically dull. This includes providing more methods for receiving content, such as via podcasts and other mobile technology as well as Web 2.0 tools. While embracing social networking tools may not necessarily give much of a competitive edge, not adopting them could, in rather short order, put your firm at a disadvantage in its ability to advance knowledge sharing and help develop junior associates into profitable firm members.

1. Chris Boyd & Mara Nickerson, *Turbo-Charging Lawyer Performance*, KM Legal, November/December 2006, 26-29.

2. http://michaeli.typepad.com/my_weblog/2008/03/work-in-progress.html

3. <http://scholarship20.blogspot.com/2008/03/science-20.html>

4. Brian Summerfield, *Sun’s Karie Willyerd: Weaving a Web of Learning*, February 2008, <http://www.clomedia.com/includes/printcontent.php?aid=2070>

Virtual Life

Another collaboration tool is virtual life. Virtual life is a digital, three-dimensional world without boundaries. The best-known public example of this tool is Second Life. Second Life is a virtual life world populated by avatars. An avatar is a graphic representation of one's self. It is a virtual personal representation as one wishes to be seen. The avatar can be male, female, young, old, strong, or weak. The avatar lives in a complete virtual world—a virtual world that includes all aspects of life: a life that is social, commercial, governmental, and educational.

What does the virtual world mean for a law firm? The Internet public version of a virtual life still raises significant privacy and confidentiality questions. Virtual life also requires an inordinate amount of participatory time. Nor is it easy to use. However, as ease of use develops, a private intranet-based virtual life may give us another collaboration model. Registered law firm member avatars can attend programs, negotiations, and trials. As teaching/learning tools, the avatars may represent clients, witnesses, firm members, judges, or the media. Virtual life is an immersive

technology. It gives an almost total life experience, but it requires significant user commitment. It is an almost total experience except that it is currently a life without nuance. Avatars do not yet mimic facial expression and body language feedback. They do not grimace or show incredulity—at least, not yet. Virtual life creators are working to solve the problem through such tools as streaming video and audio. By creating virtual trials, negotiations, or client meetings, avatars may help prepare law firm collaborators for real-life experiences.

These Web 2.0 tools add another level of 24/7/365 collaboration. A wiki, blog, text/IM, social networking, or virtual life tool will not replace traditional collaboration. They will not replace personal contact via telephone, over lunch, meeting in the library, or chatting in the office. Personal contact will remain the primary form of collaboration. But as ease of use develops, and with law firm buy-in, these collaboration tools will augment all of the above. These tools add another level of collegiality to the law firm. They expand openness and foster cooperation. These collaboration tools bring us together, right now.

External Analysis for Reducing Third Party Expenses continued from page 5

The Robert Thomas Group

The largest expense that law firms face after attorney and staff compensation costs is occupancy. Despite the promise of the virtual law practice, bricks and mortar still cost a great deal of money for most firms. Rent and associated expenses tend to dwarf most other law firm operating expenses, including IT and marketing. The Robert Thomas Group in Chicago has developed expertise in evaluating law firm lease costs, building operating expenses, and real estate taxes. The firm can audit lease

documents, operating expense invoices, and related backup materials to find overcharges by landlords. Most commercial leases specifically include an audit provision. Savings achieved through this effort can result in substantial refunds from landlords and ongoing savings for law firm tenants. As with the consultants described above, Robert Thomas is paid a commission based on the amount of money the firm saves.

Analyzing the Future

Managing a law firm and its support services through challenging economic

times requires good information and innovative thinking. Strong and proactive financial analysis within the firm can be complemented with outside expertise paid on a contingent basis to yield the most efficiently run and profitable firm. When the national and international economic environment swings inevitably back to a positive growth trajectory, the efficiencies achieved during lean times will increase the firm's financial performance even further.



Book Review:

The Geek Gap: Why Business and Technology Professionals Don't Understand Each Other and Why They Need Each Other to Survive

by Bill Pflieger & Minda Zetlin, Amherst, NY, Prometheus Books, 2006

Pflieger and Zetlin assert that business and technology people (suits and geeks) see the world in fundamentally different ways because of differences in personality and temperament that draw people to one type of work or the other, and which are probably essential to doing their respective jobs. This “geek gap” leads to miscommunication, misunderstanding, and mistrust, and, according to one estimate, may cost American businesses as much as \$55 billion per year in technology projects that are late, over budget, or abandoned outright. It may have been a factor in the space shuttle Challenger disaster, in which Morton Thiokol managers, under pressure from NASA and concerned about obtaining renewal of their contract, recommended going ahead with the launch in spite of contrary advice from their engineers.

Geeks solve technological problems: they get machines to do what they want. They view technology as art and themselves as artists, which makes sense since solving problems requires creativity. Like artists, they have a proprietary interest in what they create and view it as having an “integrity of its own.” (p. 35) The creativity required also makes it difficult to predict how long a project will take or how much it will cost. Geeks value substance over style; they

disdain anything that doesn't contribute to solving the problem at hand: corporate dress codes, buzzwords and hype, orderly work spaces. They use straightforward, often blunt, language. They are often afraid of being taken advantage of by their business colleagues.

Suits, on the other hand, influence people: subordinates, colleagues, superiors, customers. They build trust and motivate

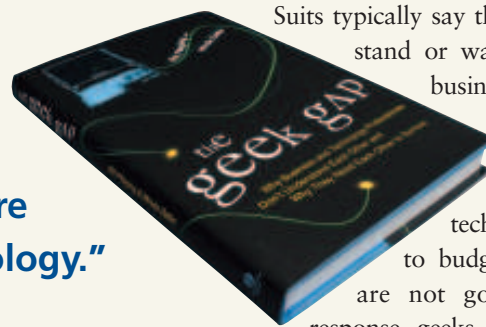
“Narrowing the geek gap is essential since in the future business will only become more dependent on technology.”

people to do good work, accept their proposal, or buy their product or service. They do this by, among other things, carefully managing their image: dress for success, use language to motivate, minimize problems, call for action, inspire, bond, and create team spirit. They work in orderly work spaces with subdued décor to suggest serious people doing serious work. For them, style is substance. Technology is there to serve the business and not vice versa. They are justifiably focused on the bottom line, after all, “No profitability, no business.” (p. 121)

These differences mean that business and technology people don't communicate well, not only because they use language differently, but also, and mainly, because their worldviews are fundamentally different. They don't understand or value each other's work or work habits. They don't trust each other to have their business' best interests at heart. Each side believes “that only their way of running an office, meeting, or party [is] the right way.” (p. 168)

Suits typically say that geeks don't understand or want to understand the business they work in, love technology for its own sake, expect suits to know about technology, can't conform to budgets or deadlines, and are not good with people. In response, geeks claim that suits refuse to learn anything about the technology they use, resist innovation, only care about money, value image over substance, and use technologists only to discard them when no longer needed.

Corporate policies can contribute to widening the gap. Providing separate work spaces may seem logical because of each group's different work styles, but it reinforces stereotypes on both sides and makes communication between business and technical staff more difficult. It marginalizes the technologists by isolating them from the rest of the corporation and makes them more



Training A New Generation of Lawyers

continued from page 7

vulnerable to outsourcing. Outsourcing or offshoring technology to a vendor creates resentment among geeks who may lose jobs (or benefits, if they transition to the vendor). Nevertheless, outsourcing and offshoring are here to stay, because they answer companies' need to focus on core competencies, provide flexibility to scale technology workforces up or down according to need (e.g., development versus maintenance), and permit cost cutting that may be necessary to meet competition.

Narrowing the geek gap is essential since in the future business will only become more dependent on technology. Pflieger and Zetlin provide several lists of things individual suits and geeks can do. More generally, employers need first to realize that the gap exists in nearly every organization and then to change policies that reinforce it. Instead of separating business and technology staff, locate them near each other. Involve technologists in projects early on so they understand the business reasons behind project specifications. Encourage each side to learn enough about the work of the other, to appreciate the talent that goes into it and to understand that the business needs both to survive.

The geek gap can be bridged. As proof, consider that Pflieger (geek) and Zetlin (suit) are also husband and wife.

4. Use of symbols and common language. While they are representative, we're not talking just about text messaging shorthand or emoticons. This category has more to do with how messages and meaning are expressed. Is it framed in words and in worlds with which they are comfortable? Vignettes and cases get built around familiar aspects of their daily life. Frames of reference need constant updating. It doesn't require dumbing down the learning. Far from it. It simply means making it more interesting, more familiar, and therefore more accessible.

5. Community. These folks are used to lots of group learning. Individual study time gets supplanted by group work, projects, team outputs, and the like. Even team grades. Like it or not, individual learning, whether in front of a computer or in a classroom, is rarely the method of choice, even if you are conveying substantive information. Today, learning takes place collectively far more than individually.

The above ingredients may not be the only five needed, but they are a critical five. While technology pervades them, it is equally clear that using all these ingredients and using all the great technology in the world will not make your training of this generation any more effective. The key to that lies in the quality of the instruction and the capability of instructors to incorporate these essentials into their delivery. If not, in the words of one of the target group, your training will be "just so five minutes ago." That's the curse of the new generation.



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