

Managing Communications on Projects: How Legal Operations and Project Management Drive Better Outcomes

Overview

This article explores three common communication challenges that arise during legal projects and how legal operations and project management expertise can help to address them. The solutions outlined below cover the implementation of new practices, project processes and improved communication approaches.

Where and how do communication issues arise on legal projects?

1. Multiple forms of communication and different working styles

Hybrid working has moved us away from a face-to-face model of communication and introduced a range of technologies which keep us connected and facilitate collaboration. The challenge arises when multiple communication channels begin to form on a project. These can include email, instant messaging, spreadsheets and specialist legal technology platforms. Communication has therefore become less direct as projects expand and resourcing extends across multiple offices.

Within this intricate web of communications, team members naturally gravitate towards the channels that align with their individual working styles and existing habits. The result is unintended friction when communication preferences come into conflict with each other.

Addressing the challenge

A well-executed communication plan serves to cut through this noise on projects and aims to simplify the communication structure. Legal operations and project management professionals can play a pivotal role in developing a coherent communication plan for a project which:

- Maps out the stakeholder structure, identifying each role and the individual / groups' involvement in the project;
- Specifies each team member's preferred communication styles and how to effectively engage with them;
- Sets out a communication policy on how team members coordinate, share and store information; and
- Identifies the reporting obligations and responsibilities of the team.

2. Unclear objectives and project structure

Engagement letters serve as a useful guide for how projects will be delivered. They set out the scope, how the project will be run, how and when the client will be updated and what the objectives will be.

When any of the project's components are not clearly set out, this results in two distinct communication problems:

- Communication with the client becomes inconsistent which can adversely affect the working relationship.
- Lack of a unified approach which results in the project objectives not being effectively communicated to the wider team.

Addressing the challenge

Engaging legal operations and project management professionals from the outset of a project can help avoid these damaging communication issues. These specialists bring dedicated project management expertise, complementing lawyers' deep subject matter knowledge, and are well placed to identify communication problems and drive practical solutions. They can assist through:

- **Scope Development:** Legal operations and project management professionals can help shape a project's scope, ensuring it is comprehensive and well defined. This aligns the team's objectives and provides clarity on the work to be carried out.
- **Structured Project Management:** As project management specialists, these professionals draw upon their expertise and experience to optimise how projects are run and managed. This significantly reduces the administrative workload on lawyers, enabling them to focus primarily on the legal work at hand.
- **Wider Team Communication:** Developing a clear scope and project structure helps drive towards a purposeful engagement letter. This can then be circulated to the wider team, ensuring that everyone has a foundational understanding of how the project will operate and what their respective roles will be.

- **Client Expectations:** From the client's perspective, a well-structured engagement letter provides clarity on the timing and methods of communication. This promotes a transparent and trust-based relationship.
- **Automation and Portals:** Legal operations professionals can offer expert advice on the implementation of client relationship portals and whether to consider automation for routine communications.

3. Knowledge capture practices

Resourcing needs can change throughout the course of a project. As team members leave, important know-how leaves with them. This is sometimes captured in handover notes; however, a deeper understanding of how a project operates and the nuances of working with a particular client are not always captured through this process.

The consequence of this knowledge gap is twofold:

- **Challenges in Team Transition:** When new team members join a project, they may face difficulties in understanding how the project operates and the intricacies of working with a particular client. This can create inefficiencies and hinder their integration into the project.
- **Uneven Distribution of Expertise:** The lack of a systematic knowledge capture process can lead to an uneven distribution of expertise across the team. This can create inefficient communication practices which lead to wasted time and unnecessary delays.

Addressing the challenge

Legal operations and project management professionals can bridge this knowledge gap through:

- **Stakeholder Mapping:** Mapping out the various project stakeholders and creating clear visual charts to demonstrate relationships and interdependencies captures the key dynamics and enables the team to direct their communications effectively. Lawyers benefit from a clear understanding of the larger communication structure of both the firm and client and where these overlap.

— **Centralisation of Expertise:** Throughout a project, important knowledge can become more centralised and captured in a set of master documents. Establishing clear governance around how these documents are structured – and consistently following up to ensure teams adhere to best practices – maximises the value gained from project-specific knowledge and ensures that processes, client-specific learnings and project structure are captured at every step.

How do other sectors leverage their communications and what learnings can be applied to the legal sector?

The management of communications in customer-facing industries such as marketing often draws from the well-established principles of the seven C's of effective communication: *clarity, conciseness, concreteness, correctness, coherence, completeness, and courtesy*. Adopting these principles ensures that information is provided in the right format, at the right time, to the right audience and with the right impact. For legal projects, this translates into tangible benefits: clearer client updates reduce the risk of misunderstanding, concise reporting saves valuable time for both lawyers and clients, and courteous, well-timed communication strengthens long-term relationships.

There is a significant opportunity for law firms to leverage these principles to optimise their own communication practices. Using the seven C's as a guiding framework, lawyers can build in structured reviews at key project milestones to seek feedback on how their communications have been received. This ensures that communication methods and styles are tailored specifically to each client, resulting in stronger, more productive relationships.

Get in touch

Legal operations and project management professionals have the specialised skills to create and implement tailored solutions, helping to mitigate many of the communication challenges that commonly arise on legal projects.

Engaging these specialists as early as possible helps ensure smooth service delivery, streamlined processes and positive relationships with clients and project stakeholders alike.

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