

METHODS IMPROVEMENT FOR LAW FIRMS

Whether you call it Lean, Six Sigma, or Total Quality Management, methods improvement techniques can be used to streamline processes, improve service quality, and increase productivity in a law firm. Our prior article, *Operation Audits for Law Firms*, describes how to identify problem areas - the first step in methods improvement. This article will describe the tools that are used to choose an area of focus, determine the root cause of the problem, and formulate a corrective action plan.

It is crucial to involve upper management and other influential members of the firm when choosing a focus area for methods improvement. By doing so, the project will have the backing needed to gain cooperation from others. Nominal Group Technique is a good way to build consensus around a project. After reviewing the findings of an Operations Audit, each person in the group is asked to state the problems that he/she feels are most critical. The group then ranks the problem statements in order to identify a focus area for improvement efforts.

After a focus area is chosen, it is imperative to take time to determine the root causes of the problem before attempting to formulate solutions. One tool for doing so is a fishbone diagram. A group of people who are knowledgeable of the process get together to brainstorm all the possible reasons behind the problem. The reasons are documented in a diagram that resembles the skeleton of a fish. This process helps stimulate ideas from multiple perspectives such as system, people, and materials. It also depicts the inter-relationships between these areas.

Possible solutions are sometimes readily apparent. More often, it is necessary to collect data on the root cause(s) to bring the most problematic aspect of the process into focus. The data is used to create a Pareto chart that illustrates the relevant frequency of the root causes. After examining the results, an orderly corrective action plan will assure that improvement efforts are applied for optimal impact.

Members of the firm who are knowledgeable of the process being addressed should be included in formulating the corrective action plan. This often involves people from diverse departments. A trained facilitator will help keep the group on task by using the proper techniques to devise solutions to the root cause(s). Brainstorming is usually an effective first step to get ideas rolling. If the problem is one of process, then flowcharting helps to pinpoint improvement opportunities. Control charts may be employed to assess the magnitude of quality problems. A run chart or force field analysis can be used to analyze productivity issues.

Although everyone in a law firm is busy, it is essential not to rush to conclusions and try to improve methods without taking the time for structured analysis. Deliberate, focused efforts will pay off in the long run. Tackling one issue at a time will allow the firm to see results and foster commitment to continuous methods improvement efforts.

The methods improvement cycle is not complete until the action plan is implemented, measured, and adjusted as needed. This can be especially difficult because it normally requires change. The next article in the series, *Change Management for Law Firms*, will address how to communicate clearly, gain buy-in, and monitor the results of an action plan.