

Case study: DLA Piper

DLA Piper Delivers Collaborative Administrative Resource Model with BigHand Now



DLA Piper implements BigHand Now task delegation and workflow technology and successfully increases efficiencies while reducing the cost of delivering administrative services across all North American offices

Overview

The legal market is undergoing the most significant change in a generation, one that requires law firms to fundamentally redefine operations. From the rise in competitive law firms specializing in the delivery of legal services rather than the practice of law, to the growing need for new metrics including Net Promoter Score rather than Profit Per Partner, the constitution and practice of law is undergoing extensive transformation.

Forward-looking firms see these changes coming – global law firm DLA Piper embarked upon a strategy to reduce costs and improve the efficiency of back office services as far back as 2011. Janet Celly, Chief of Business Operations, DLA Piper confirms, “On the one hand the plan was simple economics: to reduce the cost of delivering administrative services. But looking at the company as a whole, it required far more finesse than just looking to cut costs: it required a new way to collaborate and build the administrative support staff of the future.”

New Administrative Model

The traditional one-size-fits-all administrative service model predicated on a one-to-one relationship between attorney and legal secretary was deemed to be no longer sustainable and one that certainly would not work five or ten years down the line. “With the changing needs of attorneys for support combined with the evolution of the role of administrative support staff, our model had to change as well. We needed to be able to satisfy the support needs of different categories of attorneys while also becoming more proficient, efficient and less expensive. Finding better ways of facilitating firm-wide collaboration was key,” Celly explains.

In addition, the industry is facing a fundamental shift in demographics – it has become difficult to recruit for the generalist legal secretary role that has been the mainstay of administrative services as the next generation simply does not have the same skill set or the same workplace expectations. As Celly confirms, “There is an evolution away from the traditional legal secretary both from a supply and a demand. We wanted to develop a structure that provided career progression as well as an in-house program to build the skills we have difficulty finding.” As such, the firm needs to find a way to tap into the expertise of soon to retire legal secretaries and achieve knowledge transfer with the next generation – something that would be difficult to achieve with the traditional siloed working model.



Creating a Team Structure

Having undertaken a robust data collection exercise, including time and motion studies, to understand the diversity of tasks undertaken across the organization, DLA Piper developed a shared resource model – replacing a single individual handling multiple tasks for one attorney with multi-skilled, multi-level teams to support multiple attorneys. Celly explains, “One person can’t support ten people, but a team of five people can support 50.”

By moving away from traditional silos towards a team structure, DLA enabled senior administrators to focus on high level tasks with more generic, repetitive work delegated to more junior, lower cost resources. In addition, the new model created a foundation for knowledge sharing, ensuring the key skills of senior administrators would not be lost to the firm.

The new structure was initially supported by an internally developed tool, but it lacked the visibility required to support effective task delegation across teams and hence ensure the right task was going to the right level of resource at all times. Sonji Le Blanc, Senior Project Manager, DLA Piper, explains, “To enable staff to delegate tasks to appropriately skilled resources, DLA required an easy to use and more robust solution – a fluid, highly visual tool for users and one that provided management with a single view of all tasks at once on a dashboard.”

Achieving Visibility and Control

Having reviewed the market, DLA Piper opted to implement the BigHand Now task delegation tool to deliver the highly visual Management Information required to effectively support the restructured administrative support functions. The solution was rolled out to all 28 US offices over a five-week period, a rapid deployment supported by a detailed communication and training plan, including webinars. Each office had either DLA or BigHand floor support to encourage adoption and usage, with a subject matter expert in each location.

Automated workflows were created to support the delegation of work from highly experienced, senior staff to more junior teams, helping the firm to achieve better use of skilled resources and more efficient use of all resources, while also providing management with full visibility of each teams’ folders to track tasks and support work sharing.

The immediate, cross-office visibility of tasks also means that individuals who have traditionally worked in silos are now exposed to a raft of different activities, raising awareness of different skill requirements across the firm. Norma Spearman, Chief Legal Support Officer at DLA Piper, says, “Junior secretaries now have visibility of a whole dashboard of tasks – if these include something they have not done before, they can request training to increase their skill sets and really enjoy what they are doing, which will have an impact on retention.

This latter point is key. As Le Blanc, an active member of the Association of Legal Administrators, confirms:

“Growing numbers of firms are moving towards this collaborative approach and they want to know what we’re achieving with BigHand Now. The ability to share work across teams and across offices is fundamental to the way we are able to retain, grow and deliver better job satisfaction, not to mention providing better service more economically over longer hours of the day for our attorneys”

- Sonji Le Blanc, Senior Project Manager, DLA Piper



Efficiency, Reduced Costs and Improved Retention

This was a significant culture shift for DLA, but adoption was swift; over 8,000 tasks a month are now tracked within BigHand Now and the proportion of work carried out by lower level staff has more than doubled within six months. Moreover, as the roll-out of BigHand Now expands, both internally and across the wider business to include DLA’s outsourced agency and its Tampa business center, this is expected to increase further. For timekeepers, effective task management and better collaboration across the business ensures fast turnaround – a shift that has been particularly valuable for associates and junior associates who traditionally had to wait for secretaries to finish the work of senior attorneys. “Ensuring that individuals with the relevant skills can pick up and complete the work to a high standard, in a timely fashion is having a positive impact on both associates and client satisfaction,” Le Blanc explains.

Support staff value the opportunity to collaborate, from entering tasks on behalf of an attorney and effectively delegating work to another resource team, to the chance to actively choose which tasks they would prefer to undertake. Managers are able to improve resource utilization and ensure that individuals are delegating appropriately. As a result, the firm has significantly reduced secretarial over-time, further reducing costs.

The data BigHand Now provides is helping DLA gain insight into task delegation and responsibility, which is already helping to shape – and evolve – the firm’s administrative service model for the future. In addition to directing the knowledge transfer required as senior administrators retire, it is also informing the recruitment strategy – when additional resources are required, it is far easier to identify the level of individual needed based on task profile, which has enabled the firm to avoid recruiting highly experienced higher priced administrators when less experienced staff are needed. As Celly explains, “DLA is now creating the next generation resource by hiring educated individuals with the right skills who lack legal expertise and pairing them with more senior individuals to provide that knowledge transfer and on-the-job training. It’s a model based on continuous learning and evolution.”

Conclusion

DLA’s objective was to create a robust, collaborative operation that ensures the right job is placed with the right person at the right time to better service timekeepers and leverage the value and skills of existing staff, while creating a collaborative administrative model to support the new practice of law. As Spearman concludes:

“The bi-product has been cost reduction achieved as a result of allocating more tasks to lower level, lower cost resources and the ability to proactively manage staff to improve their skillsets and enhance job satisfaction. BigHand Now has unlocked an ongoing project that will continuously deliver ongoing benefits.”

- Norma Spearman, Chief Legal Support Officer, DLA Piper

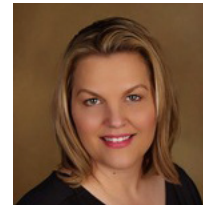
Contributors



Janet Celly
Chief of Business Operations



Norma Spearman
Chief Legal Support Officer



Sonji Le Blanc
Senior Project Manager

BigHand Now

BigHand Now task delegation technology allows the efficient delegation of work from attorneys to support staff, automating the process of getting the right work to the right person with all the relevant task information.

With a simple user interface, BigHand Now automatically routes tasks in a digital format, eliminating the need for a forms/ email/shared inbox-based system. The shared platform centralizes all task delegation and management into one system that everyone can access and keep track of work progress. Managers have a comprehensive view of workload and capacity, allowing them to modify staffing levels and assignments as needed to meet deadlines.

The greater benefit to capturing all tasks in a central repository is the ability to analyze real, quantitative data regarding the volume, type and frequency of tasks, as well as who is delegating the work and who is managing the work. Examined over time, firm management can gain valuable insight into where there are efficiencies as well as backlogs and determine which teams are overwhelmed and which have capacity. With access to accurate information, firms can collect data that enables them to make adjustments to ensure their staff are busy with the right work and are effectively managing their time. Ultimately, it puts real data in the hands of firm management to make fact-based decisions on staffing, utilization, training and trends in their workflow. **Email inquiry@bighand.com, call (951) 506-5641 or visit bighand.com for more information.**