

October 2010

A Publication of Law Bulletin Publishing Company

Chicago Lawyer®

Volume 33 Number 10 • chicagolawyer magazine.com

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Changing how law firms do business

By Sherry Karabin

As clients continue to demand more value for their dollar from their outside counsel, law firms grapple with the question of how to deliver predictable pricing and high-quality services without jeopardizing their own bottom line.

For many, the answer is turning out to be project management.

While some firms have trained at least part of their legal force in this area in the past, more are now bringing in legal consultants to do the training and to suggest the appropriate technology to carry out the task. One law school is also shining a light on the importance of managing work efficiently as an integral component of what is necessary to be successful in the legal profession. *Chicago Lawyer* spoke to area law firms, consultants and educators to see if project management training is merely a fleeting solution or is here to stay.

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"Whether it's alternative fee arrangements or simply more competition in the legal field, there is increased pressure to deliver on time and on budget," said Daniel Safran, executive vice president, legal solutions, at Chicago-based Project Leadership Associates.

"We're seeing growing interest from law firms focused on better managing their matters," Safran said. "Traditionally lawyers have not been trained to develop estimates or track actual fees expended against budget, in a timely



manner. Many lawyers use previous matter experience and gut feel to measure progress against budget. That often backfires, as many law firms report budget overruns and reduced matter profitability on alternative fee arrangements.

"In-house legal departments are also under pressure as they find themselves with a fixed

supply of resources and leaner staffs, so they need to ensure outside counsel are being efficient."

Safran said his company has teamed up with the consulting firm Altman Weil to offer legal project management training, as well as process and technology solutions, to law firms and corporate legal departments.