

# Opportunity Knocks?

## Published in KM Legal Magazine

May/June 2007

The support departments in major law firms have proved as effective as their practice group counterparts at building edifices and creating silos.

In many firms, overt yet inflexible organisational structures together with covert Machiavellian behaviour have conspired to ensure that the walls between support functions are high with cross-communication and collaboration commensurately low.

Directors, fearful of their own positions, have conducted turf wars and sought to consolidate their personal power bases, often at the expense of optimising the effectiveness of the firm. The increase in the number of CEO and COO positions over the last few years have been driven, at least in part, by the need to ensure better co-ordination, collective vision and the sharing of resources that can be leveraged across departments and teams.

However, all of these functional groups already share one thing in common; they manage knowledge in all of its forms. Is there not then an opportunity for the knowledge manager to adopt the role of integrator and agent for change?

By using KM techniques to bring together functions that are currently disparate and ensuring that synergies are realised, knowledge managers will not only create direct benefits for their firm but also ensure that collaboration in knowledge sharing becomes deeply embedded in the behaviour and culture of their organisation.

For many firms a point of inflexion is approaching. The economic forces that shape their competitive environments are beyond the ability of any firm to resist with clients demanding more sophisticated services, delivered faster, with higher consistency and at a lower cost.

Price pressure means that firms without an integrated operating model for both their lawyer and support functions are unable to create the internal efficiencies that are needed to square the circle of increasing demands at lower prices.

For some firms this will be a force that they cannot bear whilst others will use it as a time to create clear blue water between themselves and their competitors. This opportunity will arise partly through strategy but more so by improved operational efficiencies, the sharing of resources and the leveraging of knowledge – in other words by creating support departments that are integrated and aligned in their vision and their practices.

Taking the first step on such a journey is often the most difficult. Once barriers are diminished and the potential of integrated services realised there will be a cascade effect as people within the firm join the change process.

Opportunity may be knocking but it will take a combination of insight and leadership to find the right key for this door. Those with such qualities and the ability to unite their firms and align their support departments behind a common purpose will seize the high ground.

