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How One Midsized Firm Successfully Outsourced Its Help Desk

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08-27-2009

Times are tough for industries across the spectrum of business. Large or small, emerging or established businesses are working overtime to find ways to trim the fat, increase productivity and make current processes more streamlined, effective and cost-efficient.

As the chief operating officer of Kaplin Stewart Meloff Reiter & Stein, a Pennsylvania-based business law firm with 35 attorneys across three offices in the Philadelphia region, one of my core responsibilities is to ensure that the processes in place are working in favor of the firm's bottom line. When I joined Kaplin Stewart in 2002, one of the first places I looked to ensure value was the firm's outsourced services.

Outsourcing services is often part of a law firm's profitable business model. Marketing, IT, office services, research — depending on the size, climate and practice areas of a firm — any of these critical business functions can be handled by a qualified vendor as opposed to in-house professionals.

Nowhere should the "outsourcing equals savings" mantra ring more true than in the IT realm. The information technology umbrella is vast — from networks to the help desk, from product upgrades to disaster recovery — firms often find it difficult to staff an entire IT department with talent possessing the myriad of required skill sets. This is why firms often outsource at least a portion of their IT functions, and it's a good place to start when evaluating the value of vendors.

Technology Should Equal Value

After evaluating Kaplin Stewart's IT infrastructure, we decided to undertake a complete technology overhaul to move the firm from WordPerfect to Microsoft Word and to replace our outdated infrastructure, including servers, PCs and data backup systems. The firm leadership, always eager to stay attuned to its client base, charged the technology committee with selecting a vendor to handle the rip-and-replace upgrade.

After interviewing several technology firms, we chose Pennsylvania-based Adaptive Solutions Inc., or ASI, to architect and implement our project. We chose ASI because they are a legal specific firm and gave

an informative presentation that offered more than one solution specific to our firm.

One caveat of the technology overhaul was that the firm wanted to do more than simply update technology. Rather, we wanted the upgrade to accomplish three things: increase the firm's productivity and avoid stoppage of work due to a steep learning curve; increase the security and accessibility of the firm's documents and intellectual capital; and allow the firm to be even more client-centric with technology that kept pace and was compatible with its client base.

With ASI's help, we achieved the goals and the resulting benefits supported the outsourcing value objective and the firm's commitment to quality outsourcing to save money.

Next up: The Help Desk

With the successful upgrade, the firm's 75 users took to the new technology environment easily. One area in which the firm was still lacking, however, was tech support. Kaplin Stewart had no internal help desk; rather, the firm's administrator and tech savvy billing manager troubleshoot user issues in between biweekly visits from a contracted network engineer. As this process was proving to be both expensive and inefficient, in 2006, we decided to abandon the current model and evaluate two support options: hiring an in-house IT specialist or outsourcing the majority of IT support to a reputable technology firm.

Help In or Help Out?

Hiring an in-house IT specialist seemed initially to be the most obvious choice for the firm, until we started to look at the overall expenses and overhead associated with this option. According to Salary.com, the average salary for a mid-level IT support person was about \$70,000. Adding to that the cost of benefits and the expenses associated with training and turnover, and we were looking at a significant chunk of the IT budget for just one team member. Considering that an in-house pro would need time off for vacations and sick days and would bring a singular skill-set to the table, we began to more carefully consider supporting our team with a professional, outsourced help desk service.

In order to evaluate the outsourcing option, we turned once again to ASI to help us pull the help desk picture into focus. ASI offered a remote help desk service called xTend I.T., a legal-specific help desk that offered, among other things, remote control of client desktops, a feature that we knew was critically important for our firm given the fact that we had no IT staff in-house and needed technical issues to be resolved quickly to avoid interference of workflow. Additionally, the xTend I.T. staff was familiar with the firm's legal applications suite, from document management software to practice applications.

ASI's annual contract fee for its 40-hour-a-week help desk service was reasonable, and given our positive experience using ASI in our technology overhaul, we signed on with ASI for the xTend I.T. service in spring 2006.

Ongoing Cost Savings is Critical

ASI put an affordable support program in place. With encouragement from my team, our staff and attorneys began using the remote help desk right away, and we quickly discovered that the xTend I.T. staff was attentive, available and, most importantly, knowledgeable about a wide range of technical

issues and applications including more obscure legal products. The cost to our firm was less than half the estimated per-year cost of hiring a full-time IT professional, yet the coverage was constant and the help desk team was responsive.

In today's bootstrapping economic climate, firms can no longer afford to outsource services that do not bring the same quality, offer the same benefits or produce the same results as an in-house team. Although a lesser-quality vendor may initially cost a firm less in out-of-pocket expenses, a sub-par service or deliverable can cost far more to a firm in the long run.

In our firm's case, outsourcing the help desk has saved us on average \$50,000 per year when compared with hiring a single in-house specialist with supplementary outsourced support. Given the current economic climate, choosing the lean, cost-effective outsourcing option has helped our firm remain economically healthy in a tumultuous time in our industry.

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