

Best Practice Clinic: Implementing your quality management system

This page last updated : Wednesday 1 June 2005



June 2005 page 56

Best Practice Clinic: Implementing your quality management system

By Greg Dwyer

Greg Dwyer is a solicitor and Director of Practice Development and Consulting Services at the College of Law. Best Practice Clinic provides tips and strategies for practice management. If you have a query you would like raised, email Greg Dwyer at gdwyer@collaw.edu.au.

Terminology

One hurdle to implementing management systems is the language we use.

While recently updating the chapter on Quality Management in the Law Society's Guide to Better Client Service to include LAW 9000, I was taken by the comments of the late Philip King that, although lawyers tend to think quality means technical perfection, clients think it is about the level of service they receive. They take technical competence for granted. Another description, which the College uses in its training courses, is that quality is "the ability to repeatedly meet customer requirements".

I raise this because the term 'quality' is perhaps more abused than well used. Some practitioners cringe when they hear it, and terms like 'quality control', 'quality assurance' (QA), and 'total quality management' (TQM) can be a hindrance rather than a help to those given the responsibility of implementing management systems in legal practices. Even 'Best Practice' is not without its critics.

Another approach, suggested by Michael Bersten of PWC Legal at a forum on Incorporated Legal Practices in 2003, is to avoid any contentious jargon and just call them "systems which underpin professionalism". What some law firms recommend is to call the systems and processes they implement their "management system" or even just "business procedures". They find the process of implementation carries less baggage if it can be characterised as 'the way we do things around here'.

Resources

When implementing a management, compliance or business system of any

kind, one of the first issues is available resources. Generally, implementation does not happen in a vacuum. The day-to-day work has to continue. It is important to note the following:

- Someone has to coordinate and oversee implementation and maintenance of the management system. There are obviously issues of scale, with differences between small, medium and large practices, but if the system is planned and managed effectively, this need not be a full-time role. Some additional administrative involvement will be required to support and manage ongoing tasks associated with the system, such as, for LAW 9000, coordinating internal audits and corrective actions. Automation can minimise but not avoid these tasks completely. But usually they can be undertaken at a more junior level if appropriately supervised.
- All staff will be required to participate in the management system to some degree. Staff members will ideally be involved in writing their own procedure documents, conducting internal audits of procedures in other departments, raising corrective action items, and so on. All staff will need to be trained in finding, using and following procedures associated with compliance.

The degree to which these tasks become onerous will clearly depend on the ways in which the system is planned and implemented. A practical approach to setting up the system and integrating tasks with everyday work practices (rather than creating 'additional' tasks to manage quality) will assist to minimise staff and management time commitments.

A high degree of management and staff participation and commitment will ensure that the system provides operational efficiencies as well as certification benefits. For the future of your practice and your people, this is a sound investment if wisely directed.

Communication

The most effective tool in handling cultural change is to manage staff expectations. This requires:

- planning changes to your systems to make them effective, based on the principles of involvement, ownership, clarity, simplicity, maintainability and interaction; and
- implementing these changes using appropriate training and mentoring, providing adequate resources, and allowing your people to have a voice and relevant input.

It is only possible to change permanently the culture of your practice with the right degree of planning and staff consultation. By the end of the implementation, the aim is that your staff will feel a responsibility to and for the formal processes and documentation which they have set up. If that is done properly, the procedures become part of the day-to-day work of the practice, and are not put in a separate compliance or quality box.

Note: This article is based in part on the LAW 9000 course materials prepared for the Centre for Best Practice by Realisation.

< [Prev](#) [Next](#) > | [Back to Contents](#)

The Law Society of New South Wales (ACN 000 000 069) | 170 Phillip Street,
Sydney NSW 2000, Australia | DX: 362 Sydney
Phone: +61 2 9926 0333 | Fax: +61 2 9231 5809 | lawsociety@lawsocnsw.asn.au
| [Privacy Statement](#) | [Legal, Copyright & Disclaimer](#)
[Weblinking Policy](#) | © Law Society of NSW | The Law Society website is best
viewed in Internet Explorer Browsers (versions 5 and above)