

'CULTURAL BARRIERS' LIMITING RECRUITMENT OF PROJECT MANAGERS AT IBERIAN LAW FIRMS

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What is a law firm project manager?

Legal project managers perform a variety of roles that go beyond the simple steering of a case from start to finish, contributing to the consistency and uniformity of a firm's methods. The role depends on each firm's needs, but usually entails ensuring projects are carried out within budget and timeframe, and following best practices to homogenise a firm's services.

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While global law firms boost their ranks of project managers, some Iberian law firms – while acknowledging the need for greater efficiency – say local lawyers are 'less oriented towards plans and processes'

During the last 12 months, many global firms have taken steps to increase the number of project managers they employ. For example, Linklaters has reportedly tripled the number of project managers working at the firm's offices around the world over the last year – it is understood the firm now uses project managers on 30-40 per cent of major transactions. Similarly, Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer and Clifford Chance have been hiring more project managers in the UK in the last 12 months. Meanwhile, with reference to the US market, consultancy Altman Weil's 2015 "Law Firm's In Transition" study revealed that 44 per cent of US law firms are providing project management training to "increase efficiency of legal service delivery".

However, while Iberian law firms recognise that clients are now demanding faster and more efficient services, some lawyers argue that cultural difference make it difficult to implement project management structures in Iberian law firms. According to Francesc Muñoz Molina, chief information officer at Cuatrecasas, Gonçalves Pereira in Barcelona, striving for greater efficiency is the main driver of project management recruitment in law firms. "A balanced team improves a firm's profits without sacrificing the quality of work delivered," he says.

Process 'scares Latino lawyers'

However, while many global law firms are increasing the number of project managers on the payroll, the trend has yet to catch on in Spain, due to cultural differences, Muñoz Molina says. "It is 'trendy' to have project managers, but it has yet to become a trend here," he adds. "If the 'P' words – process, plan and project – make a lawyer's hair stand on end, they do so even more for a Latino lawyer. In general we are more creative, more flexible and agile, but less oriented towards a plan or a process," he said.

Portuguese law firm PLMJ recently created the position of managing associate, which equates to the project management role. Partner Nuno Cunha Barnabé says the hiring of project managers has not yet become common practice across the Iberian Peninsula but it may happen in the future. "The need may arise to recruit project managers, when it becomes necessary to have a structured, analytical and disciplined methodology, and when firms are less focused solely on the domestic market," he adds.

PLMJ says it has addressed this issue by appointing 12 managing associates across diverse practice areas – their role is managing projects as well as the team itself. "The managing associate will always be the main point of contact with the client and will be responsible for detecting any opportunities that may arise during the course of the project," Cunha Barnabé says. He adds that project managers become more necessary as the workflow increases, and thus there is a greater need to monitor and manage projects.

"Essentially, it has become necessary to make the work of providing services to clients faster and more efficient," Cunha Barnabé continues. He points out that project managers require the skills needed for designing and applying management strategies, while understanding the concepts of profitability, efficiency and value creation. In addition, they need leadership and teamwork skills.

"Lawyers and law firms are increasingly multidisciplinary, and many are not able to deal with every aspect of a client's case, requiring help from people in other areas, and in such cases having a project manager has become crucial," Cunha Barnabé says.

But fully harnessing the benefits of a project manager will require adjustments, Muñoz Molina argues. "If we want project management in Spain to be a success, we need to adapt our methodology, and make it lighter," he says. "We have refocused with a leaner philosophy to make the learning curve less steep." But Muñoz Molina says it is crucial that lawyers are trained to embrace the concept of project management.