

Matthew Parsons & Associates is Open for Business

Contributed by Sean Hocking
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Matthew Parson, former CKO at Linklaters, announced that his new consulting firm, Matthew Parsons & Associates, is open for business.

Teaming up with Neil Richards, legal technologist and fellow Linklaters alum, the two share what they believe to be are the four significant forces requiring law firms to reassess their KM strategy.

- (1) content that would traditionally be drafted internally drafted is now available from content providers;
- (2) a step change in both the maturity of enterprise search, and the maturity of ubiquitous web content management platforms and richer interfaces
- (3) increased opportunities for knowledge process outsourcing; and
- (4) increased activity and investment in knowledge initiatives within major clients applying pressures on firms both for content and for KM advice

In assessing the effectiveness and appropriateness of the firm's current strategy, and to set the direction going forward, they posit two distinct levels of strategy setting and organisational responsibility.

First, there is a firmwide strategy, and secondly there are practice and business services specific knowledge strategies. The clarity on the boundaries and inter-relationships of those strategies is vital to aligning the KM strategies of the firm with the overall business strategy of the firm. These are very different things, with the firm knowledge strategy focussed on the strategic value to be accorded knowledge in the organisation, the organisational goals as it relates to knowledge, and the approach and processes by which the organisation will work to achieve those goals.

At the firm level the knowledge strategy addresses three strategic, and three operational elements:

Strategic intent: There are a series of strategic choices which the firm needs to consider that will shape its overall approach to knowledge. At the heart is the decision as to what extent does the firm want to build and leverage its collective expertise within and across practices? For some firms, the answer may be that search of previous work product is a sufficient extent. For others, focused proactive effort to leverage the organisational best-practice around specific topics will be a better strategic fit.

Is knowledge building and sharing core tenets of the firm, or something which is an optional goal for each practice? What are the overall knowledge quality and investment levels which the firm wants to make, and that it recognises as appropriate? What is the approach to build versus buy on content, and what content can be outsourced? How does the firm want to be positioned in comparison to competitors in relation to knowledge for use by its lawyers, and by its clients – to what extent does it want to create and project new knowledge into the marketplace to clients? How global or local does the firm want to be in its knowledge objects – is the default orientation to as global as possible, or as local as possible? What structures, reporting framework and roles will support that strategic intent?

Firm culture: What are the behavioural norms in relation to the creation, contribution and access to knowledge which will characterise the firm as a whole (both now, and in the future)? How are these behavioural norms to be reflected in performance measurement, appraisal and promotion systems? How open or closed is the culture of the firm in sharing work product outside immediate practice groups, and how is risk managed both in regards to access and redaction of

previous work as part of knowledge stores? What is to be expected of knowledge partners, practice leaders, professional support lawyers and librarians? Is a focused knowledge and training plan one of the elements of the Practice Leaders' annual business planning process, and is centralised training of people in those roles to be provided?

Client access and services: What access (if any) should clients have to firm-generated knowledge assets, or to client specific work product held in the firm's knowledge repositories? What level of knowledge-related services and assistance may be provided to important clients from the various arms of the firm, ranging from PSLs, to librarians, to people in technology whose knowledge may be valuable for the client in considering its own knowledge and technology initiatives. Whilst it is unlikely for most firms that this assistance will be a revenue generating activity, there are issues around internal charging models, and tracking and recording value to the client which should be addressed at a firm level. Where revenue generating products may be available, what is the governance and process by which they will be identified, funded, supported and delivered?

Each of these three strategic elements require detailed consultation with practice leaders, senior management, business development, human resources, training and risk, and is not something that the KM Steering Group can do alone. The role of the KM Steering Group is to catalyse the conversation and ensure the agenda is moved forward, and to supervise the process by which the strategy emerges, rather than to set the strategy as a group.

Practice planning and support: At a firm level, the knowledge governance group need to determine what is to be required of each practice in planning and implementing knowledge strategies, and the level of support to be provided to them in undertaking that task. Whilst the strategy may be to achieve a certain level of quality, and a uniformity of approach, assistance, support and training will be required to assist dispersed practices and practice leadership. In a global law firm there is little, if any, legal knowledge that is created at an overall firm level which is relevant for all practices in all countries.

The realities of legal knowledge creation and use is that both the content strategy setting and the implementation is practice led, rather than centrally led.

The KM Steering Group cannot identify, or create the legal knowledge which will support the business plans of individual practices – there are no detailed over-arching knowledge content plans that covers all practices. However, it is critical that the firm level strategy provide clear guidance on how practices should develop a strategy for managing knowledge, the quality level that is expected to be attained, and the support which will be provided.

Technology platforms and systems: The nature of technology platforms is that consistent knowledge platforms are desirable from both an economic and ease of re-use perspective. A range of technology platform decisions are necessarily taken at a firm level, both as to platform and also key systems – it does not make sense to duplicate what are pieces of organisational knowledge infrastructure in different practices and locations. These are important decisions, but are increasingly not strategic decisions in the sense that core knowledge systems are increasingly like email systems - it is not a strategic decision whether a firm needs an email system – it is part of being in business.

The KM Steering Group is accountable for ensuring that the firm has appropriate plans in place for the core knowledge systems that are technology enabled: for enterprise search, intranet platform, and also the firm's approaches for the tracking of key organisational knowledge including expertise, major clients, recommended law firms, major matters, contacts, awards, pitches, cvs, publications and the like.

The KM Steering Group should ensure that there is a considered approach in relation to each of the identified core firm knowledge systems, review the prioritisation of effort in proceeding through the list, and the degree of integration between the various stores. The great rate of change recently in Web 2.0 enabled systems, intranet platforms, enterprise search and rich user interfaces means that these priorities should be consciously re-examined and prioritised.

Audit and process: the final implementation element surrounds governance and audit, specifically the process by which the existence, quality, usage, and impact of key knowledge objects will be evaluated, monitored and acknowledged at the practice level, firm level and individual level. This draws heavily on both the strategic intent for the firm knowledge strategy, and the cultural work as that feeds through into processes for evaluation and management of practices and individuals. When auditing knowledge objects, this requires identification of the likely or appropriate usage levels of various of the core knowledge systems in order to be able to compare that expectation to actual usage levels with measurement and analytics embedded in various systems. How often should quality and usage levels be reviewed? An emerging issue will be who should conduct the audit process – there may be an opportunity to engage internal risk or internal audit functions to centralise these governance related activities. On those processes in particular, accounting firms are much more advanced than law firms in peer based quality reviews.

Reference: Matthew Parsons & Associates's Knowledge Thoughts blog (May 6)

<http://www.knowledgethoughts.com/blog/?p=136>