

Is It Possible To Turn Lawyers Into Project Managers?...Or Will They Crash and Burn?

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We're hearing and reading it everywhere - meetings, forums, roundtables, firm retreats, articles - alternative pricing might not be eliminating the billable hour, but it is challenging the billable hour. The discussion is, naturally, always couched in understanding costs. After all, how can we possibly put a price tag on a task or matter when we don't know what it costs? An interesting spin on that question is, if we have historically tracked costs, how do we determine the reason the same task costs twice as much to do one time versus another? Is it because there was an added complication one time or was the job just poorly managed? If it's the latter, is it possible to MAKE someone (a lawyer) a good project manager? Is it possible to change someone's behavior in order to drive the cost down? Will the push to drive down costs provide an impetus to change behavior? Is it possible to change behavior across a firm, i.e., change the culture of the firm?

How often does one hear cost reduction and human behavior in the same sentence? Last week, during Hildebrandt Institute's Marketing Partner Forum, there was a lively debate about just that: is it possible to change behavior to drive down costs. The general consensus? A disappointing no - it is not possible to change behavior to drive the cost down ... or really for any reason. Now perhaps I was standing with a particularly cynical group, but I want to challenge that consensus. Lawyers are inherently competitive and, I believe, if challenged to become good project managers, they will become some of the best project managers. Or would it be easier to just toss in the towel...or as my colleague would say "**crash and burn**"?

In the meantime, is it time to hire professional project managers?

-- Carla Landry, Washington DC