

## Assessing the Performance of Client Service Teams

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Law firms—client team enthusiasts among them—often ask for a formula to help them measure the effectiveness of their client service teams. While some firms believe their teams are essential to a systematic client-care program, others, unclear about what expectations they should have of client team results, question their value. Client service teams are formed for many different reasons, and all should not be expected to achieve the same results; therefore, a cookie-cutter performance checklist is not the proper tool for measuring team success. The key to assessing the effectiveness of a client service team is to develop a customized set of performance criteria that adequately addresses the original purpose of the team and, at the same time, accounts in real time for changes in the relationship or marketplace that may alter the team's objectives.

In some cases, a law firm's conclusion that a team is failing may be accurate, and the team should be either dissolved or redesigned. However, in other cases, the conclusion that teams are not achieving their intended results may signal simply that the firm needs to revisit the original performance criteria it established for the team.

For instance, a law firm that measures the success of all of its client service teams by asking whether the team has generated additional work or revenue might conclude that those teams that have not done so are failed experiments. But there are many reasons to formalize client service teams other than the short-term generation of additional dollars. In developing an assessment tool, firms also must bear in mind that a team's purpose may have evolved since its inception. Many successful law firm client teams end up yielding results radically different than the firm originally expected because the team members have encountered and responded to opportunities and challenges not envisioned at the outset.

## Revisiting the Objectives of Client Service Teams

In the process of fine-tuning performance criteria for evaluating individual client service teams, it is helpful to review the principal reasons why law firms create teams in the first place. The original law firm client service teams, now decades old, had multiple goals: they were vehicles for managing the staffing and billing for those clients and/or for institutionalizing and expanding key client relationships. Today the reasons for launching client teams are as varied as the teams themselves:

- ***To make institutional and sustain the firm's relationship with a loyal client that already sends most of its work to the firm.*** This kind of client team has as its principal objective maintaining the firm's client share. The team serves a coordinating function, organizing everything the firm does for the client and facilitating communication among all lawyers and staff members who serve it. The purpose of sustaining teams is to ensure the client's satisfaction, nurture the client relationship, and maintain consistency in the firm's service level and responsiveness across practice areas.
- ***To raise the firm's profile with a client who already uses the firm for a particular practice expertise or in a specific geographic location.*** The purpose of this kind of client team is to showcase the firm's depth in a particular substantive area or geographic market and thereby expand the firm's work for that client accordingly. Such teams focus on introducing additional lawyers in that practice or location to the client, on highlighting the reach of the firm's expertise, and on promoting activities—including conducting targeted CLEs, publishing client-specific examples of relevant thought leadership, and orchestrating a steady stream of one-on-one interactions—to position the firm as the go-to choice for the majority, if not all, of the client's work in that field or region.
- ***To cross-sell the firm's services to a client for whom the firm already works in at least one practice area.*** The purpose of this kind of team is to expand the firm's client share into additional practice areas or geographic markets. The most common of client service teams, they often are created after a firm has had an opportunity to develop a trusted advisor role in one substantive area or simultaneous with a satisfied client's expansion of its business into new areas, which, in turn, opens up new marketing opportunities for the firm. In setting up such teams, the law firm is searching for ways to capitalize either on the client's burgeoning satisfaction with the firm or on its growth. A major focus of these teams is to help the firm develop marketplace knowledge to understand better its client's business needs and to market its ability to meet those needs more effectively than the competition. These teams are most effective when the law firm has gotten to know the client well enough to transfer the relationship of trust it has earned in one area of practice or geographic region to other firm individuals or practices.

- ***To position the firm to new and prospective clients.*** The primary purpose of this kind of team is to introduce the law firm’s breadth and depth to clients who have just engaged it for the first time or who have no prior experience with the firm’s substantive or service strengths. These teams often grow out of strategic business planning that calls for specific practices or industry teams to penetrate new markets. They rely on relationship-building against a backdrop of visibility activities collectively designed to create top-of-mind awareness of the firm, either for its practice experience, its leadership in a particular geographic area, or its industry depth.
- ***To maintain or improve the quality of the firm’s client service.*** This kind of team is set up to assess and improve the firm’s responsiveness to a particular client. While all teams have to focus on client service in order to achieve their overarching purpose—be it business expansion or maintaining client share—these teams are designed specifically to gather and act on client feedback in order to help the firm grow closer to the client. The team coordinates firm efforts—such as client service interviews or needs assessments—and works closely with every lawyer who serves that client to make sure he or she is knowledgeable about the client’s business, aware of the challenges and opportunities it faces, and providing exceptional service customized to the client’s preferences and priorities.
- ***To get referrals from loyal clients.*** These teams are set up to focus strategically on clients that already send the firm a substantial amount of work and who theoretically can help the firm create new relationships and win new business within the client’s particular industry or geographic market. These teams typically focus on clients such as private equity funds, investment management firms, accounting firms, consulting firms, or other law firms in jurisdictions where the firm does not have on-the-ground capability.

## Forging Ahead

In evaluating client teams, firms should examine the rationale for their creation, whether they have responded accordingly to changing relationship and marketplace dynamics, and whether they are functioning as smoothly and effectively as possible. In the course of that analysis, there are many questions firms should ask that apply to all teams, regardless of why they originally were formed, such as:

- Is the team well-led?
- Is the team meeting as frequently as it needs to?
- Is the team exploring the full range of substantive, service, and management issues appropriate for the client?
- Is the team communicating adequately with firm leadership?

- Is the team communicating appropriately with the client?
- Is the team following through on its action plans?

Many firms were overly enthusiastic at the launch of their client team programs, creating too many client teams and underestimating the resources and time it takes to implement an effective team. Evaluation reveals that some of these firms have paid insufficient attention to every team, with the outcome that some are less vibrant and provide less benefit than others. However, the fact that some teams need improvement or refocusing does not support the conclusion that client teams inevitably will become the latest in a long series of TQM-like fascinations that law firms have developed and abandoned. What it does suggest, however, is that firms need a rigorous approach to client teams and an equally rigorous approach to their evaluation.

Administered according to best practices, client teams can make a significant contribution to client satisfaction, development, and expansion. Always important in a competitive marketplace, they can be particularly helpful during an economic downturn. By helping law firms focus on maintaining and enhancing their most important client relationships, client teams contribute to sustaining the levels of profitability required to retain the highest-performing partners so critical to the firm's long-term growth. Thus, having a rigorous process in place to evaluate key client teams and to maximize their value, both to clients and the firm alike, is simply good strategy.