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Achieving IT
Operational Excellence

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Examining how the concepts of IT Operational Excellence helped helps the legal industry meet its business objectives provides a sound roadmap for any IT organization trying to deliver excellence.

By seitelleeds & associates

Simply put, "IT Operational Excellence (ITOE)" is the effective and efficient delivery of information technology (IT) services that add measurable value to your business. So why is ITOE significant and not just more business-speak that proliferates the business world? How can ITOE contribute to the excellence of a law firm? This article answers those questions by looking at the commonly cited business objectives stated by law firms and showing how ITOE can help achieve them. When asked to list their business objectives, a sampling of law firms had the following response:

- Increase profits
- Deliver legal services efficiently and effectively
- Ensure proper use of investment and operating funds

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- Increase staff productivity (time is money!)
- Improve employee satisfaction with their day-to-day jobs

Managed and operated well, IT systems are enablers of the business processes that help law firms meet their goals. ITOE offers a three-pronged approach to providing well managed and operated IT services through a series of three tightly-integrated best practice approaches:

- IT Engineering
- IT Security
- IT Service Management

 Information technology is, of course, just a one piece of the puzzle to achieve law firm business objectives. What ITOE, specifically, does is professionalize an IT department, increasing its ability to provide measurable value in support of achieving these law firm business objectives.
Sounds easy, right? It is actually a very ambitious endeavor that requires buy-in and support from all levels of the law firm. From the IT side: IT needs to shift its thinking on how it delivers services and take a fresh look at what it means to deliver high quality services, to the right people, when they are needed. From the business side: the business must be willing to engage with IT both to identify new and enhanced services, as well as to agree on the level of service that IT is to provide.
The remainder of this article examines IT Engineering, IT Security, and IT Service Management and shows how improvements in these areas can infuse excellence in the IT organization, enabling IT to help the firm realize its objectives.

The Three Components of ITOE

The first element of ITEO is well-engineered systems. The history of engineering traces a direct link between society's reliance on systems (particularly those with life and safety implications e.g. boilers, bridges, and power grids) with regulated and professionalized engineering. IT is moving into the realm of systems that support life and safety issues (e.g., hospital and traffic control systems) and must also codify and professionalize the engineering and configurations of IT systems.
Soundly engineered IT systems must also incorporate an appropriate level of security, the second element of ITOE. IT security is multi-faceted and includes:

- Confidentiality: data that is protected from unauthorized access and use
- Integrity: accurate and complete data
- Availability: data is available when needed
- Privacy: confidentiality and integrity of information related to individuals

Finally, secure, high quality systems engineered according to industry and regulatory standards must also be operated and managed effectively and efficiently. IT Service Management (ITSM) is a process-driven framework that organizes people, processes, and technology in order to deliver high quality IT services that are aligned with the business. Specifically, ITSM utilizes:

- Process: Business-aligned IT processes that are defined, repeatable and efficient
- People: Trained and certified staff with clearly defined roles and responsibilities (as per the defined processes)

- Technology: The IT systems and tools we use to deliver services (as per the defined processes)

IT Service Management focuses on 1) service delivery: agreeing to the nature and level of service to be delivered with the customer, ensuring that the infrastructure has the capacity and availability to deliver those services, developing IT cost models that will enable the firm to accurately budget and account for IT and 2) service support: restoring service after a service disruption, ensuring that changes are approved only if they are well planned and are in support of the firm's business objectives, and minimizing service disruption.

Bringing It All Back Home

So, how will ITOE support a law firm in its ability to meet its business objectives? ITOE is the link between IT and the business.

Increase Profits

How does a law firm increase profits? The calculation is simple: increase revenue and decrease costs. In fact, the remainder of the business objectives all support this über-objective of increasing profits.

ITOE can help to increase revenue by implementing systems and processes that more accurately capture time or allow staff to bill more (i.e., adding remote functionality, decreasing the time spent on administrative tasks, decreasing network downtime). It can help decrease costs by streamlining the delivery and support of services, streamlining the services offered, and ensuring projects and purchases are truly in support of the firm's overall goals.

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Deliver legal services efficiently and effectively.

To provide legal services, attorneys must bring together vast amounts of information. They rely on knowledge management tools such as portals, document management systems, and search engines. The ITOE approach explicitly supports the delivery of such services in an efficient and effective manner. "Effective operation" is code for providing the right services at the right time. "Efficient operation" is directly linked to providing those services cost competitively.   ITOE supports this through providing law firms with:

- Well engineered solutions that deliver highly available services to support business productivity (e.g., document management systems that are available 24x7, enabling attorneys to work whenever, wherever)
- Highly available systems that are supported by refined and repeatable processes and by technology efficiently operated by well-trained people

Effective delivery of legal services must include proper security of confidential client communications and documentation. ITOE relies on tools such as firewalls, intrusion detection systems (IDS), and intrusion prevention systems (IPS) to protect and secure this information.

Ensure proper use of investment and operating funds.

Being able to answer the question "Why does IT cost so much?" with an appropriate level of granularity (e.g., by IT service, by practice area, by location) will help you make better investment decisions and have a sound basis for such analyses as TCO and ROI. The firm will be able to say no to services when the costs outweigh the benefits. Being able to make such calculations is part of the ITSM component of IT Operational Excellence.

Increase personal productivity.

You will achieve more efficient and effective levels of productivity by implementing technologies that enable collaboration, bridging geographic boundaries (e.g., video conferencing, unified messaging, mobility devices, instant messaging, presence management). IT will be building and delivering those services that truly aid in the business' ability to deliver external service or product. Operationally, IT will know what services are most important to the business and will be able to effectively prioritize and provide support that meets the business' stated requirements.

Improve employee satisfaction with their day-to-day jobs.

Retaining the investment you have in your employees helps decrease costs (by not having to hire and train new staff) and improves employee morale. Many factors contribute to job satisfaction, and when staff can not access the systems they need when they need them, frustration prevails. ITOE's emphasis on sound engineering and supporting processes can help an organization deliver the right services at the right time to the right people, thus enhancing user/employee satisfaction on a day-to-day basis. Not only will there be less unexpected service disruption, but communication channels will be improved and staff will have insight in to what is changing, what to expect, and how to request and communicate their needs.

Now What?

How do you start achieving IT Operational Excellence? It depends. Of course, no one likes this answer (though in law firms that answer may have better traction than other industries), but your starting point should bear a direct relationship to the pain points in your own organization. Are you suffering from poorly engineered IT systems or is there a process breakdown? Are there upcoming business changes such as the addition of a new office? Is the firm challenged to meet records retention requirements? Or is your document management system not meeting the partners' needs?

Every organization is unique, yet the majority of our law firm clients do have one common pain point: a disconnect between IT and the business. The business and IT do not talk to one another in a meaningful fashion, so IT has to make assumptions about the firm's requirements. In order to bridge this gulf, we have helped our clients implement Governance and Advisory Boards and establish Service Level Management (SLM) processes. Governance Boards and SLM processes work to formalize the communication between the business and IT, establishing a unified framework for providing quality IT services.

No matter how you begin operating and managing your IT systems effectively and efficiently, just getting started is a significant accomplishment. In order to ensure success, just start, contract with an external advocate or consultant, and stay committed to ITOE. With a long-term

commitment, your IT systems will add measurable value to the business.

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