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Treating Meeting Addiction: How a Legal Team Cut Back on Meetings—and Found Happiness

Anna Zhang, The Asian Lawyer

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Last year, a tongue-in-cheek [internal video featuring in-house lawyers](#) at Australian telecommunications company Telstra Corp. Ltd. went viral among company employees. In the film, lawyers, including group general counsel [Carmel Mulhern](#), proudly reported their achievements in rejecting meeting invitations and cutting back time spent on unproductive meetings.

"Now, instead of logging back on after dinner, I get to spend time with the family," said one lawyer in the film. The recovering "meeting addicts" shared experiences of saying "no" to the numerous meetings that had consumed most of their working day, and they celebrated finally getting their lives back. Some used the time to get actual work done; some were able to achieve better work-life balance; and some spent that time learning new things, like playing the trumpet.

The video, while done with humor, was intended to showcase some of the results of a year-long experiment that explored ways to improve efficiency among the company's legal team. The initiative, dubbed the [Telstra Legal Innovation Forum](#), is a collaboration between the telecom company's legal department and Herbert Smith Freehills. The program launched in November 2015 with 30 members from both organizations, who zeroed in on a number of productivity issues and began tackling them. The team succeeded in resolving four of them by the end of the first year.

[Mick-Sheehy-Vert-201705101633.jpg]

One of the issues they addressed concerned the scheduling of too many internal meetings. In 2015, the legal team collectively spent more than 60,000 hours attending internal legal meetings, said Mick Sheehy, Telstra's general counsel in charge of finance and strategy, who described the experiment at this year's Corporate Counsel Forum in Hong Kong.

"About half of these meetings are information-sharing meetings with other lawyers, including meetings where messages are cascaded multiple times over multiple meetings to audiences that have often already heard the same messages," Sheehy said. "We had a hunch we were spending

too much time in internal legal meetings."

The innovation initiatives team decided to categorize all meetings into either an information-sharing meeting or a decision-making meeting. They then ran an eight-week trial, during which all lawyers were required to limit their information-sharing meetings to five hours every two weeks. Decision-making meetings, meanwhile, had to meet three requirements before they could be scheduled: The decision that was to be made had to be articulated in the meeting invite; only lawyers who were absolutely necessary to make the decision could be invited; and all materials relevant to the decision had to be distributed and read before the meeting.

The changes resulted in a 50 percent reduction in both types of meetings. And 80 percent of the lawyers reported improvement in productivity after attending fewer meetings, Sheehy said.

In addition to reducing the number of scheduled meetings, the program also ran trials that ultimately saved 5,300 hours in drafting confidentiality agreements - a decline of 82 percent from 2015. They also found ways to cut the amount of time spent on writing internal reports by two-thirds. And they increased efficiency in the internal communications approval process by nearly 30 percent.

In the end, the program managed to eliminate more than 40,000 hours of low value, non-strategic work - the equivalent of 17 full-time employees in a team of approximately 200, according to Sheehy. "These time savings are not about head count reduction," he said. "A substantial portion of these savings help us spend more time on strategic work, achieving better work-life balance for our team and enabling our people to invest even more of their time on innovation."

The innovation forum, which continues to run in 2017, is part of an effort to install dedicated legal operations management at Telstra's in-house legal department. The process started in 2013 when senior lawyers at Australia's largest telecom service provider started pondering innovation in the face of an annual 10 percent budget cut.

Lawyers then produced a long, comprehensive, detailed and well-worded list of all of the things they could do to improve productivity in Telstra Legal. "I recall us being very proud of producing that list. With that out of the way we all returned to our desks to attend to our day jobs," Sheehy said.

But not much changed.

"Of course we didn't have any real plan to bring any of those items to life other than that we all agreed they were very important and we also seemed to think if we all shared the responsibility, that would maximize the chances of things getting achieved."

Eventually, they realized that the only way to make change happen was to have someone whose only job was to see those changes through. Telstra made its first move by hiring then-King & Wood Mallesons Melbourne partner Amanda Bodger as head of people and operations for the legal department in late 2013.

Bodger runs a lean team of four people who oversee operations of Telstra's 200-lawyer legal department in Australia. The team has helped the legal department be more efficient, flexible and diverse in expertise.

Sheehy said the work has just began. "I don't think we are by any means there yet in terms of this role," he said. "We need to beef up the legal operations function further. We need tech specialists and data analysts. I'm confident we'll do this over time as we get better at framing the business case for this investment."

"But the initial appointment is certainly the most important step."

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Anna Zhang is based in Hong Kong, where she writes about the business of law and legal issues in Asia and Australia. Contact her at azhang@alm.com. On Twitter: [@annazhangc](#).

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