

Research consistently shows that workload and time pressures remain among the most significant pressures facing legal teams. This also impacts the legal team's

Urgent	3	1
Not Urgent	4	2
	Not Important	Important

## Legal Leaders Use the Matrix to Expand Time

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effectiveness in a range of other areas.

For example, the ability to demonstrate the value of the legal function is compromised if clients perceive lawyers as “a black hole into which issues enter, and sometimes never emerge” (a direct quote from a head of HR). As described to me by one general counsel, the real difficulty is “trying to climb above the ‘busyness,’ to present our clients with strategic preventive solutions.”

The obvious refrain, “Let’s expand the legal team so that we can do all the work,” is often not an option. Many businesses deliberately keep lean legal teams because they are a vital resource, yet not part of their core business: “We are a [fill in the gap], not a law firm.” And even with the luxury of few limits on expanding the team to meet workload, astute general counsel recognize that empire-building is often not the answer if it merely compounds an existing problem.

Yet when I speak with general counsel whose legal teams seem constantly in overdrive, they remain concerned about burnout of their lawyers who meet constant urgent deadlines. In these discussions, we’ve found lots of ways to help, yet the following simple diagram seems consistently to resonate strongly with busy legal teams.

It provides a simplified view of four main work types which flow into most legal teams.

In my experience,

most lawyers are great at dealing with category 1 work: A big merger facing the company is both urgent and of critical importance, and rightly commands a huge resource commitment from the legal teams. Similarly with category 4, we all have piles of paper we might get to “if it blows up,” but it’s neither important nor urgent.

Yet the “I’ll get to it if it blows up” approach illustrates the real issue—the critical distinction between categories 2 and 3. If category 4 work (not important, not urgent), becomes urgent, lawyers will often deal with it: “After all, we’re client-focused, right?” Many lawyers, however, describe their days in terms which implicitly recognize the dilemma: “I didn’t get a chance to do what I really needed to do today, it seemed like I was constantly putting out fires.” In short, if the work slips into category 3, it gets done.


The real problem is not that category 3 work shouldn’t be done; often it needs to be addressed. Yet if asked to categorize their day, many lawyers admit that the important but non-urgent project they’ve been meaning to complete, perhaps for many months, is repeatedly relegated as the urgency of category 3 presses down. And, when you ask about the category 2 work, which seems never to get done, it’s often something that

would actually deliver more value to the client and free up the lawyer’s time.

For example, the team may have developed a series of checklists, a training program, or an online tool to generate the most common documents required. These initiatives may have been identified to help the business better understand key legal parameters or more easily access their most common legal needs—providing a faster service and freeing up the lawyers’ time to focus on the strategic issues.

The rich irony is seldom lost: Many lawyers recognize they are too busy to do the very work that might actually make them less busy! In these circumstances, a simple tool like the diagram can prove useful. As one general counsel commented: “We have already seen some great benefits [from its use]...in particular, the increased focus on non-urgent/important.”

The trick, then, is twofold. First, constantly ask yourself whether you should do category 3 work when category 2 remains to be done. Secondly, find a way to deal with the cries of anguish as some of the “urgent” work languishes for a time. Ideally, try to manage their expectations in the process. The memories of a relatively short period of perceived low responsiveness will soon dissipate when you roll out a series of initiatives that help the business more effectively deal with its legal issues.

By leveraging rather than simply expanding the legal team’s resources, you might also free up more time to focus on strategic issues. In other words, for real client focus, don’t meet some client demands just long enough to wildly exceed their highest expectations. 

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