INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A LEGAL PRACTICE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM ON EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY AT A SMALL LAW FIRM

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on the impacts of the implementation of a software package [the Legal Practice Management System (LPMS)] to support the operation and management of a legal practice on employee productivity. The focal organization is a law firm in Thailand employing thirty-two people, which has been facing various business challenges from both internal and external factors. This Information Technology-enabled business process was identified as the key organizational development intervention to address some of the existing organizational challenges. The implementation of the LPMS was carried out in eight months. The researcher developed the 6As Implementation Framework, which is a combination of the Appreciative Inquiry principle and Socio-Technology Theory (STS). It was used as the Implementation Framework for this project. A series of intervention activities were conducted throughout the implementation period to align the socio structure with the technical structure of the system in order to minimize any resistance to the changes. The post implementation results show significant improvement in the area of employee productivity, specifically a reduction in time when searching and managing documentation, increasing accuracy and visibility in managing everyone's calendar and schedule, and mitigating risks losing documents. Additionally, employees have been empowered to be more responsive to client queries through a centralized and on-line information system with minimum waiting time.*

Keywords: *Law firm, software implementation, technological organizational development, legal practice management system, case management system, information technology implementation.*

1. Introduction

This research focuses on an investigation of the impact of the Legal Practice Management System (LPMS) on employee productivity at a small Thai firm. The key objectives of the LPMS implementation were to: (1) enable the firm to be more responsive; (2) increase visibility across the organization; (3) standardize working procedures within the organization; (4) increase employee productivity and satisfaction; and (5) improve its financial performance.

The rising competition in the legal service industry, clients demand for better service and lower rates, the emergence of new technologies, and the shift to globalization have all forced law firms to adapt in order to survive in this dynamic environment. The adoption of Information Technology (IT) has been proved to help organizations improve their operations through faster decision making processes, better information visibility, more accurate and reliable information, and better cash flow and forecast management (Banker, R.D., Chang, H. and Kao, Y., 2002).

The focal organization in this study is a small family-owned 32-employee law firm in Thailand, established in 2000. The owner is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and President of the company. The organizational challenges were identified through an organizational assessment in order to help identify the areas that required immediate development and improvement.

The Legal Practice Management System which the firm chose as its IT platform to support its practice and operations is the Abacus Law software package (www.abacuslaw.com) which includes the following functions:

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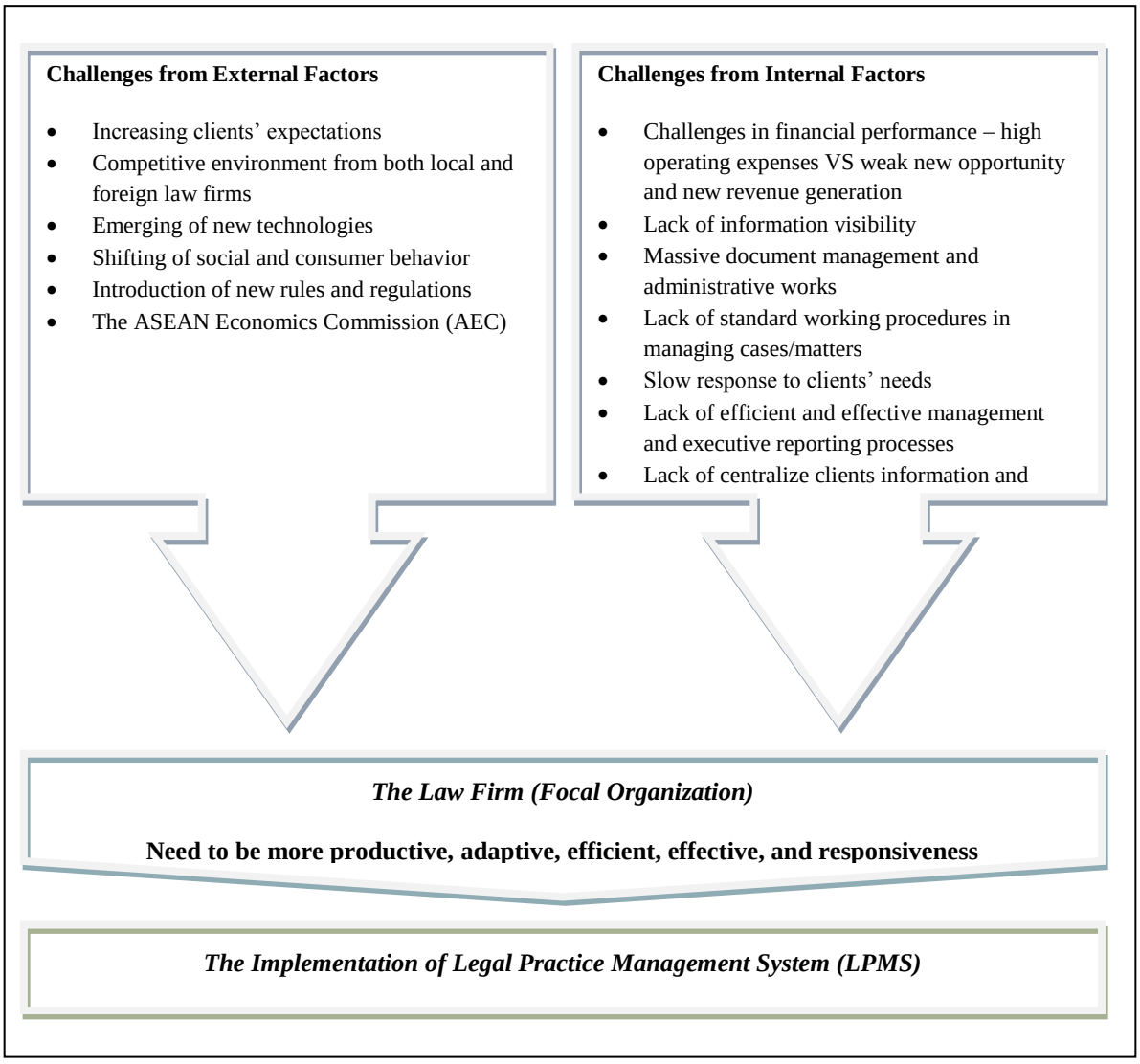
- *Contact Management*, which manages the firm's contact information. It provides the firm with the ability to capture all contact types such as clients, prospective clients, assigned attorney, opposing attorney, judge, expert witnesses, vendor, and so on and helps it integrate contact information and eliminate data entry duplication.
- *Document Management*, which supports the digitizing and automating of the firm's documents as well as their integration with case files in the Case Management module.
- *Case/Matter Management*, which supports the creation and maintenance of clients' cases or matters concerning the integration with the contact database, as well as the calendar for all events related to any particular case or matter.
- *Legal Calendaring*, which helps the firm manage staff calendars and schedules. As shown in Figure 1 below, the key organizational challenges of the firm can be grouped into external and internal factors.

As a result of the pre-organizational development intervention assessment, the firm decided to deploy the LPMS so as to enable and empower the company to handle and respond to both internal and external business challenges.

While there have been a number of widely published studies on the impact of IT implementation on organizational performance for manufacturing firms as

Figure 1 - Internal and External Challenges



well as for various types of service organizations in the telecommunications, banking, and healthcare industries (e.g.Banker et al., 2002), there have only been a few studies on the impact of software implementation on the legal service industry, especially small-to-medium sized law firms. This study will therefore contribute to this field of studies, all the more as it is considered new in Thailand for law firms to acquire such an integrated and packaged LPMS. Moreover, this study will be beneficial to the Thai legal service industry interested in developing their organizations through the implementation of software since the majority of local Thai law firms, legal departments in local organizations and governmental legal entities have barely leveraged the benefits of such a standardized software program or similar system to manage operations and practices.

This study, however, has limitations. First, it focuses on one medium-sized Thai law firm located in Bangkok. Second, since it is an organization with only thirty-two employees, some of the findings in this study might or might not be applicable to smaller or larger law firms. Third, whereas this law firm's structure involves a single owner, there is a variety of law firm ownership structures, such as Limited Liability Partnership (LLP) and Limited Liability Corporation (LLC), which may result in different decision making processes as well as leadership styles. Fourth, this study does not include an assessment of the employees' computer skills and proficiency and focuses on examining the impacts of the LPMS implementation on three dimensions: employee productivity, employee satisfaction, and the company's financial performance, thereby providing further opportunities for scholars or organizational development practitioners to expand this research and address its limitations.

2. Literature Review

- *Information Technology-Enabled (IT-Enabled) Organizational Change*

As shown in Figure 2 below, the implementation of the five-leveled IT-Enabled Business Transformation model developed by Venkatraman (1994) yields a wide-range of potential benefits to an organization. The range of potential benefits, however, depends on the degree of changes made to the business processes and IT enabled.

The degree of Business Transformation and Potential Benefits which the Venkatraman's model may generate for the organization run from the"Internal Integration" through to the centralized database, which integrates information from everyone in the same place during the "Business Process Redesign".

The new business processes were designed during Stage 2 of the implementation in order to align the way employees would work with the new IT system. As a result, the researcher and the organization expected medium benefits to be derived from the LPMS.

- *Information Technology Adoption and Organizational Performance*

Scholars have studied the impact on organizational performance from the implementation of IT systems within a firm (e.g. Melville et al., 2004), which will depend on the level of IT adoption and level of change in the organizational infrastructure that the firm is willing to make (Venkatraman, 1994). Adapting Melville et al.'s (2004) integrative IT business value model, this research focuses on IT business value at the focal firm level. Therefore, a study of the impact of IT adoption at both the business process level and organizational-wide level was carried out (Brynjolfsson Hitt, 2000) as depicted in Figure 3 below. As Figure 3 shows, the deployment of IT resources consist of: (1) technology resource, which is the specific business application

(Broadbent and Weill, 1997) of the legal practice management system; and (2) human IT resources, which are the SALC Group's project team, project champion, and company executives and management team who will support the project. Moreover, supporting organizational resources, such as the company's policies and rules, organizational culture and organizational reward system (Barney, 1991), may improve existing business processes or generate a new way of doing things, which can ultimately impact the organizational performance.

- *Information Technology Implementation and Employee Productivity*

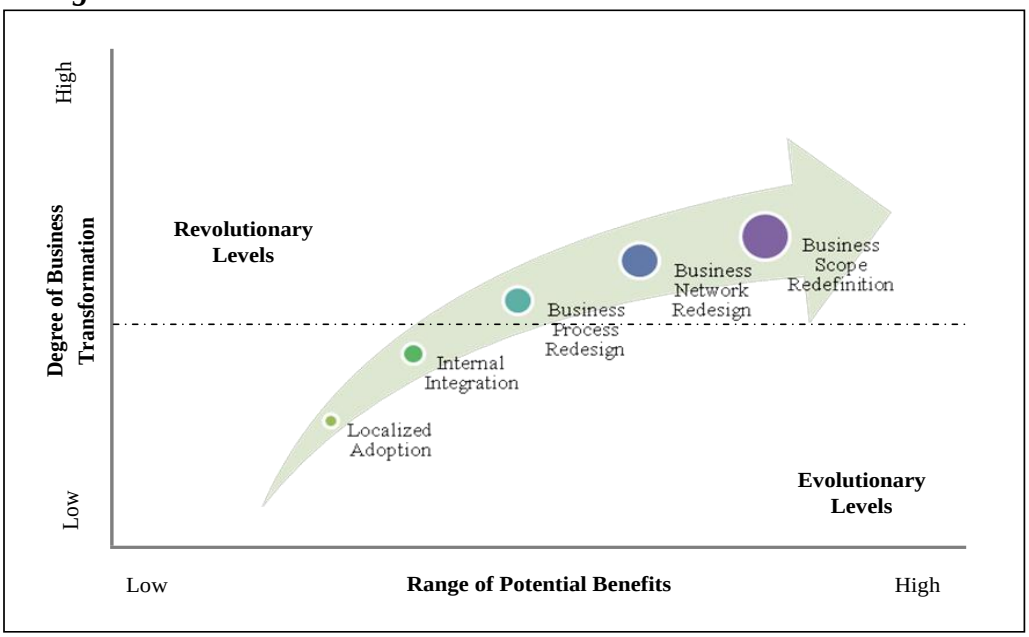
Productivity is a fundamental measurement in the contribution of IT investment (Brynjolfsson, 1993). This has raised a number of questions for organizational executives to consider over how to measure technology contribution and justify a growing IT investment when there have been previous unsuccessful IT adoptions.

IT implementation has played a significant role in shifting industries and organizations from being manufacturing-oriented to being information-oriented, as well as in enhancing their competitiveness (Stratopoulos & Dehning, 2000). However, most organizations fail to realize the advantages and full potential within the projected timeframe (Santors, B.D. and Sussman, L., 2000).

There has been a tremendous amount of organizational investment in IT implementation and adoption, with such investment expected to enable the organization to become more productive, effective and efficient. A mixture of business values have been derived from the implementation of IT systems as organizational development interventions (Kauffman & Weill, 1989; Soh & Markus, n.d.).

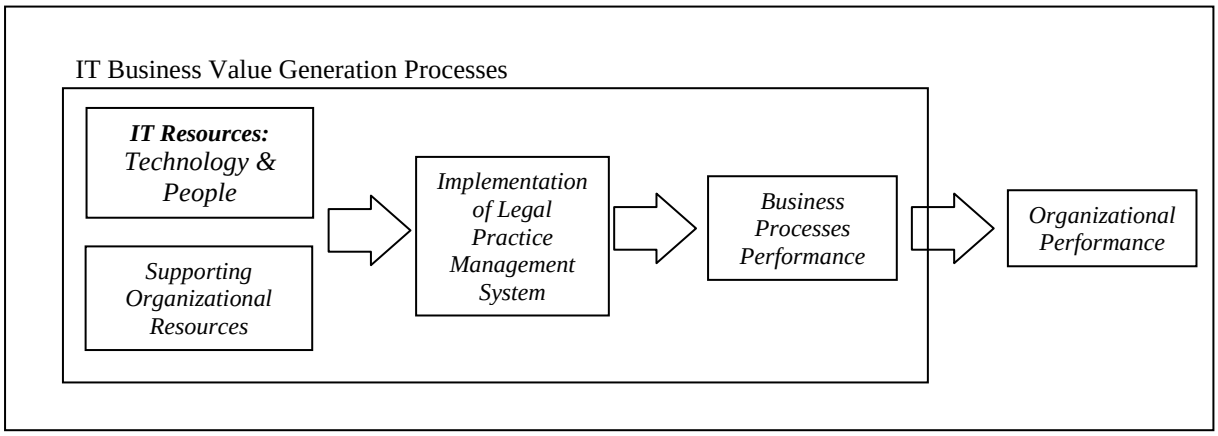
In the 1980s and early 1990s, empirical research on IT productivity identified immaterial productivity improvement (e.g. Brynjolsson & Yang, 1996). More recent evidence shows that IT is associated not only with increased output (productivity), but also with consumer surplus, and economic growth (Hitt & Brynjolfsson, 1994; and Brynjolsson & Yang, 1996). On the other hand, a number of studies on productivity have shown that only a few anticipated such benefits immediately after

Figure 2 - The five-level IT-Enabled Business Transformation Model



Source: *Adapted from Venkatraman, 1994*

Figure 3 - IT Business Value Generation Processes at the Focal Firm Level



Source: Adapted from Melville, Kraemer, and Gurbaxani (2004)

completing the implementation or have encountered failure paradox (Cron & Sobol, 1983; Roach, 1989; Haris & Katz, 1989; Noyelle, 1990; Strassmann, P.A. 1990; Roach, 1991; and Brynjolfsoon, 1994). This is due to: (1) misalignment of the changes in people, structure, task, and technology (Bostrom & Heinen, 1977); (2) failure to redesign the work processes and structure to support the implementation (Bostrom & Heinen, 1977; and Soh & Markus, n.d); (3) resistance to change due to the perceived usefulness and ease of use (Davis, 1989; and Hong & Kim, 2002); (4) no linkage between IT adoption and the evaluation and measurement of the firm's performance; (5) a lack of executive commitment (Willcocks & Lester,1996) and (6) lags between the learning curve and the usage of IT systems (Santors & Sussman, 2000).

3. Hypotheses and Methodology

Business case studies published by legal management system vendors show that the implementation of the LPMS can help a law firm: (1) increase productivity and save time on routine tasks (James Law Group – Legal Files case study, 2008; Ryan, M., 2002); (2) increase the firm's efficiency (Horizon Elder Law & Estate Planning, n.d.; Smith, Johnson and Antholt, n.d.); and (3) increase information security and integrity (Horizon Elder Law & Estate Planning, n.d.). So, by having the firm deploy the computerized and packaged LPMS, the internal integration between various departments within the firm should be improved, and key business processes should be re-designed or enhanced through the integrated and centralized legal case file and client information database.

Based on the above concepts ad previous studies, the following hypotheses and propositions were developed for this study:

H1A: *There is no difference between pre-ODI time usage (Precontact) and post-ODI time usage (Postcontact) in searching clients' contact information. Precontact = Postcontact*

H1B: *There is no difference between pre-ODI time usage (Preschedule) and post-ODI time usage (Postschedule) to identify case members' availability. Preschedule = Postschedule*

H1C: *There is no difference between pre-ODI time usage in identifying own cases/matters status (Preownxase) and post-ODI time usage in identifying own cases/matters status (Postowncase). Preowncase = Postowncase*

H1D: *There is no difference between pre-ODI time usage in identifying a case status by another firm's members (Preothercase) and post-ODI time*

usage in identifying a case status by another firm's members (Postothercase). Preothercase = Postothercase

The following propositions were articulated for the qualitative measurement of the post-ODI results in order to understand the impacts of the LPMS implementation on these qualitative perspectives, identified as main concerns of the organization.

- Proposition 1: *The implementation of the Legal Practice Management System will help to reduce the loss of documents.*

- Proposition 2: *The implementation of the Legal Practice Management System will help to increase the visibility of executives and employees over on-going matters.*

- Proposition 3: *The implementation of the Legal Practice Management System will help to standardize the process of gathering and documenting case information.*

- Proposition 4: *The implementation of the Legal Practice Management System will help to improve the management of deadlines and team availability.*

This study was carried out by applying a combination of Action Research (McIsaac, 1995; and Brian, 1998) and Appreciative Inquiry, a positive-based organizational development principle (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) as the methodology to facilitate the implementation of the LPMS. In addition, the Appreciative Inquiry principle was used to form the questions used to collect qualitative data. The researcher focused on positive-based questions in order to enable interviewees to demonstrate their positive thinking and views. Also, the researcher developed an implementation framework, termed the "6As Implementation Roadmap", as the guideline for the research team and the organization to deploy the LPMS.

This study collected both quantitative and qualitative data to test the hypotheses and analyze the impact of the OD intervention throughout the implementation of the LPMS. Since the organization has thirty-two employees, this is interpreted as the population size of the study (N=32). Qualitative data was collected through one-on-one interview sessions with executives and employees, on-line questionnaires, the company's documentation, and observations.

Quantitative data were collected based on the pre-defined hypothesis variables so as to enable the researcher to complete the mean comparison and statistical testing of these variables. Both qualitative and quantitative data (and their variables) were collected for both the pre-OD intervention (during Stage 1 of the 6As implementation roadmap) and post-OD intervention phases (during Stage 6 of the 6As implementation roadmap). Table 1 in Annex 1 displays the list of pre-ODI and post-ODI quantitative variables and the sources of data.

4. The 6As Implementation Framework and Interventions

The implementation of the LPMS was carried out using the 6As Implementation Framework, designed and developed by the researcher as a guideline for the organization to deploy the SALC-LPMS. As depicted in Figure 4, the 6As Implementation Framework consists of six key stages spread across the implementation timeframe on the basis of the size and duration of each project. Table 2 in Annex 2 details each stage of the 6As Implementation Framework as well as the key organizational development intervention activities carried out during the implementation of the LPMS and the duration of the implementation of each stage.

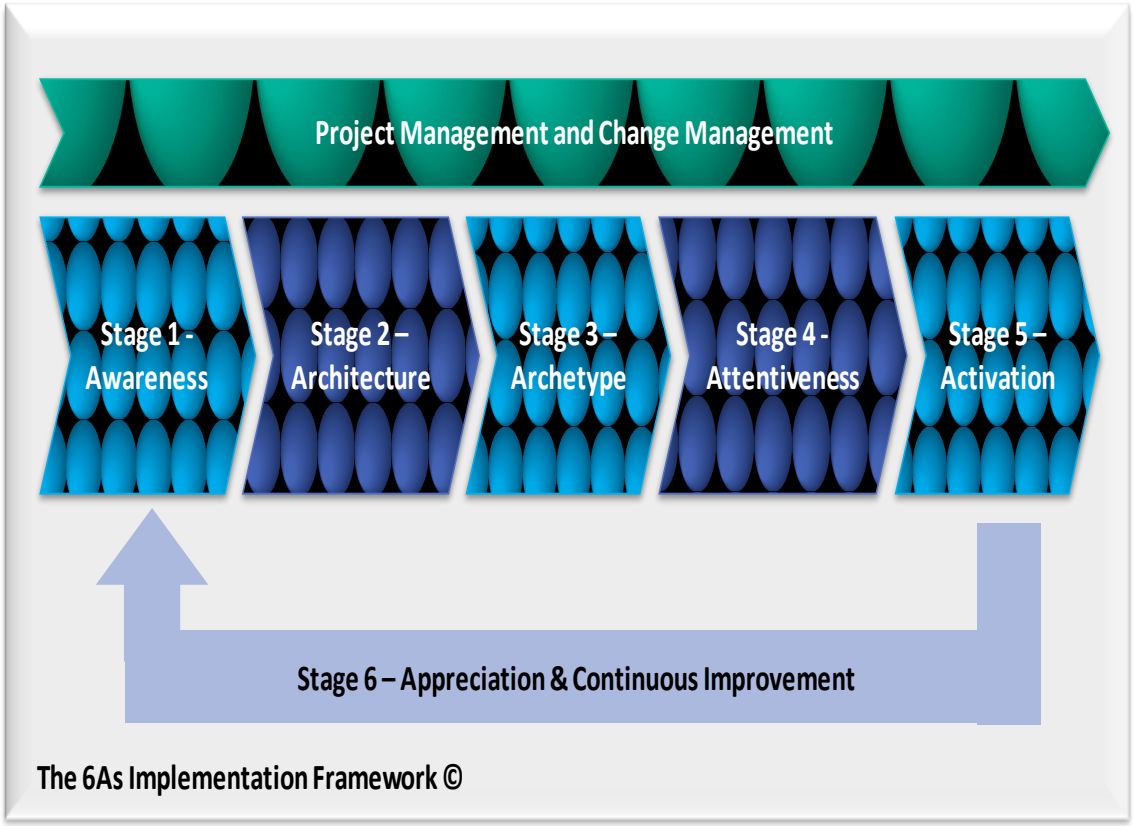
5. Hypothesis Testing and Proposition Analysis

The proposition-by-proposition analysis of the research is as follows:

- *Proposition 1: The implementation of the Legal Practice Management System will help to reduce the loss of documents:*

Through the one-on-one interview sessions and observations, the researcher was able to identify that new document management business processes empowered employees in the organization and allowed them to manage their documents better. Users or employees were able to access the electronic copy of the documents from the system.

Figure 4 - The 6As Implementation Framework



- *Proposition 2: The implementation of the Legal Practice Management System will help to increase executives' and employees' visibility of on-going matters:* The executives can now directly access all matters in the LPMS. All lawyers have been asked to keep their cases or matters up-to-date all the time, so the executives and the management can view the status of the cases together with the latest information. With the availability of the LPMS, executives can obtain information themselves which helps increase their ability to monitor the organization. Not only can executives view on-going matters, they can also view closed matters for further reference. This better visibility by the management and executive teams helps to increase organizational productivity.

- *Proposition 3: The implementation of the Legal Practice Management System will help to standardize the process of gathering and documenting case information:* The pre-defined screen fields define the way users or employees enter data into the system with the same standard, for example, the mandatory data that the organization would like to collect for further analysis. The standard coding system, for example, the type of clients or cases and the status of the matters or cases will facilitate the searching, reporting and analyzing processes. For example, users or executives can query the system to produce information about the on-going

Table 5 - Pre and Post-ODI Employee Productivity Results

Hypothesis	Pre-ODI Variable	Post-ODI Variable	Mean Differences	at 95% confidence interval			Hypothesis Testing & Conclusion
				Paired t-Test value	Degree of Freedom (df)	Sig. Value (2-tailed)	
H1A:	Precontact	Postcontact	42.56250 seconds	12.932	31	0.000	**Rejects Null Hypothesis**
H1B:	Preschedule	Postschedule	33.82813 seconds	6.598	31	0.000	**Rejects Null Hypothesis**
H1C:	Preowncase	Postowncase	53.84375 seconds	2.390	31	0.023	**Rejects Null Hypothesis**
H1D:	Preothercase	Postothercase	3575.25000 seconds	1552.045	31	0.000	**Rejects Null Hypothesis**

criminal cases or closed cases of a specific lawyer. Based on an observation of how the system has been used, this proposition is confirmed to be valid.

As to quantitative data and hypothesis testing, the researcher measured the means of the pre- and post-ODI variables and then compared them, using the Pair t-Test method at the confidence level of 95 percent, n = 32, to identify whether the implementation of the LPMS had any significant impact on employee productivity. Productivity in this particular case can be defined as the gain of time: finding client information; identifying colleagues' availability; identifying their own latest case statuses; and identifying others' case statuses. The comparison of pre- and post-ODI and the hypotheses testing results using the Pair t-Test method are summarized in Table 5.

Conclusion

Three activities, the re-design of the organizational structure, re-alignment of people's roles and responsibilities, and business processes were key intervention activities which contributed to the successful implementation and adoption of the Legal Practice Management System at the law firm. One of the main objectives of the ODI activities throughout the implementation period was to align the organization, people, process and technology to ensure successful adoption of the LPMS. Additionally, one of the key intervention activities - the delivery of the series of user training programs before the launch of the system - was significant in respect of users' acceptance, understanding and use of the system.

The Appreciative Inquiry principle, embedded as the foundation of all the queries, discussions, designs, and reflections of everyone in the organization, brought out positive energy to support the acceptance of the implementation of the LPMS. Regarding the qualitative data and quantitative outcomes, it can be concluded that the implementation of the LPMS for this small Thai law firm had a positive impact on employee productivity through the automation of business processes, re-design of the business, management of people's expectations, perceived ease of use, understanding and acceptance, executive commitment, and regular communication. All of these key factors contributed to the success and acceptance of the implementation at this organization.

The hypothesis testing of all four cases rejected the null hypotheses. It can thus be summarized that this ODI created positive differences (time reduction) between pre- and post-ODI in the following areas: (1) identifying client contact information; (2) identifying the team's availability; (3) identifying one's own latest case status; and (4) identifying other colleagues' case statuses. Moreover, the organization has now standardized the case or matter information collection processes which have helped to improve and facilitate the searching, reporting preparation, and analytical processes.

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Annex One

Table 1 - List of Pre and Post-ODI Variables

No.	Variable & Description
1.	PRECONTACT: Pre-ODI time used in identifying client contact information
2.	PRESCHEDULE: Pre-ODI time used in identifying team's availability
3.	PREOWNCASE: Pre-ODI time used in identifying own case status
4.	PREOTHERCASE: Pre-ODI time used in identifying others case status
5.	POSTCONTACT: Post-ODI time used in identifying client contact information
6.	POSTSCHEDULE: Post-ODI time used in identifying team's availability
7.	POSTOWNCASE: Post-ODI time used in identifying own case status
8.	POSTOTHERCASE: Post-ODI time used in identifying others case status

Annex Two

Table 2: Details of the 6As Implementation Framework and Key ODI Activities

Stage/Duration/Key Objectives	Samples of Key Intervention Activities
Stage 1 – Awareness/ 4 weeks To create the organizational awareness of the project. During the awareness stage, the executives will demonstrate their commitment and explain the objectives of the project in order to gain organizational acceptance and commitment to drive for successful implementation.	• Conduct the project launch workshop; • Conduct formal communication sessions to everyone in the organization on the objectives of the project; • Conduct pre-ODI interviews, surveys, productivity testing and workshops to gather pre-ODI results; • Create the project charter as the rules for working together on the project.
Stage 2 – Architecture/ 6 weeks The objective of this stage is to create the designs of the new business processes or working procedures and align them with the LPMS. The designs were completed through a partnership of the research consulting team and the organizational project team.	• Facilitate and conduct the business process design workshops; • Communicate the changes of existing work processes and new business processes throughout the organization, to create proper understanding over the implications or benefits of such changes; • Facilitate the review and feedback sessions of the new business processes.
Stage 3 – Archetype / 4 weeks The objective of this stage is to establish the parameters and business processes in the LPMS according to the business processes designed in Stage 2, and to conduct system testing and user acceptance testing.	• Work with the technical consulting team to explain the designs from the business for the setup of the system; • Work with users and the technical consulting team to develop the testing scenarios for both system testing and user acceptance testing and facilitate and coordinate the testing sessions to ensure that any issues are addressed promptly in order to minimize user resistance in accepting the system; • Redesign and align the organizational structure, roles and responsibilities according to the new business processes.
Stage 4 – Attentiveness / 3 weeks The objective of this stage is to prepare the readiness of users and the system before launching the LPMS for real use. Also, the project team members will transfer all data from the legacy system to the new system that was designed during Stage 2.	• Conduct training sessions for key business users in order to empower them to be the "Trainer"; • Work with key business users to deliver training for executives and staff; • Conduct an assessment of user readiness for the activation and launch of the system; • Communicate the project status and updates throughout the organization.
Stage 5 – Activation & Stabilization / 16 weeks The objective of the fifth stage is to activate the LPMS for real usage, establish the user support structure, and to provide support to users should there be any problems using the system.	• Work with the organization to establish the user support team who will help users to use the system; • Communicate throughout the organization to prepare individuals for the readiness of the launch of the new system; • Launch campaigns to motivate and encourage users to use the system; • Assist key business users in supporting users and handling queries during system usage.
Stage 6 – Appreciation & Continuous Improvement / 4 weeks (part-time basis) The objective of this stage is to give everyone in the organization the opportunity to provide their views and feedback on the implementation and use of the system after three-to-six months. The post-ODI results were gathered during this stage along with interviews on the areas for further development.	• Conduct a post-ODI workshop by using the Appreciative Inquiry principle to facilitate the workshop; • Gather feedback, opinions, and views from everyone on the implementation and use of the LPMS; • Gather post-ODI results through interview sessions, productivity scenario testing sessions, workshops, observations, and an on-line survey; • Present the findings to the CEO and organizational executives; • Conduct the project closure.