

Mirror mirror on the wall

Altruistic Ventures founder Allister Spencer talks to Jacqui Dabell about why law firms around the globe are instructing AltV to see a true reflection of their business and how they can differentiate themselves in a crowded sector



To what degree do you think top tier law firms really differ? Do they all approach you with similar problems?

We find that if you break them down into two major categories, the business of law and the practice of law we get two very different results. The top tier firms show similar levels of sophistication in the governance and discipline that exist around the practice of law. This can vary greatly when compared with smaller firms. That said, there is limited differentiation on pricing models, service designs and technologies. The business of law on the other hand shows huge discrepancies

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amongst peer firms. Take procurement as an example, we see some firms have a militant maturity to procurement with similarly positioned firms having virtually no due process and the ability to effectively procure. So the spectrum in the business of law is where we

find the most gains occur when engaging external expertise to help improve internal processes.

How do the nuances of each firm affect the way AltV provides bespoke solutions?

We pride ourselves in engaging with our clients in a very bespoke manner, in our experience each firm has its own “personality” and we have to read that very quickly in order to

have an effective and successful engagement. We tailor our approach to align with the businesses complexities, resourcing capability, methodology knowledge and others.

I have marooned you as a castaway on a desert island...which book, piece of music and luxury item will you take with you?

War & Peace (got a lot of time on my hands), Portishead – Dummy, \$3million RV.

What are the greatest barriers that affect the way you work with firms – culture, mindset, processes?

I think the greatest challenge is in the people and culture areas. It’s the natural position of people to resist change so when, for instance, you are replacing a finance system at a firm that has been in place for almost two decades the mind shift of everyone in that business is often underestimated or altogether missed. So our approach is to ensure the business is heavily engaged throughout the project or programme to ensure adoption and contentment is achieved, it requires an order of magnitude of extra effort but pays enormous dividends at the end of the journey.

How do law firms differ in culture and what helps to bond staff to firms?

As mentioned before we see that each firm we engage with has a unique “personality” for want of a better word. A firms culture almost always stems from senior leadership and will often be a near mirror of their personality traits. From our perspective, to be able to read that quickly and tailor our management and execution approach to compliment this is paramount to breeding success.

How much does law firm brand perception matter? How should firms market themselves to attract the right graduates and the most creative and pioneering staff? How have you helped firms to outwardly market themselves?

Firms spend an enormous amount of money on ensuring its brand is attractive to its market audience. Whether it is a small boutique, specialist or general practice law firm they all appreciate the fierce competition in the market place and as such work very hard to differentiate themselves from their peers, no easy task! We often work closely with the PR department of firms when nearing the end of projects to make sure press releases are bespoke and demonstrate how the work we undertake ultimately benefits the clients they work for.

What makes a good firm culture to promote transformation and change implementation?

One of the biggest is a zero blame culture, as the old adage says it’s better to try and fail than not try at all! We see the most successful firms achieve this are the ones that take a humanistic



approach to all change and properly engage their people to guide them on the change journey. They are few and far between unfortunately but one of our key goals as a business is to change this with every firm we work with. We also try to get the firm to alter the traditional KPI's for the lawyers, yes for the foreseeable future the billable hour is still here but there are many more "soft" metrics that should be rewarded to encourage the right cultural fit for the firm.

What do you think is the greatest threat to law firm stagnation?

I think the tyranny of being too successful is often the biggest hurdle to firms embracing change and rejecting stagnation. The whole point of the inception of methodologies such as kaizen, lean and six sigma was to provide business with small margins the ability to incrementally change and improve the products they made. When a business is on a



1 or 2 percent margin these small changes are paramount to their survival. A law firm on the other hand is highly profitable and the thought that disruption or change is required often leaves the partnership scratching their heads and asking why.

How can we bridge the gap between lawyers and business services departments?

Embed them in the practice groups and arm them with the right tools and methodologies to effectively extract the business requirements of the group and show them how they can improve their day to day operations and remove frustrating and time-consuming tasks. They offer a valuable alternate lens on the problems the lawyers and secretaries face and in having them be present and observe them on a daily basis has proven highly successful in many firms that we have worked with.

How can we help departments un-silo and share knowledge and info?

This is a very tricky one and very specific to a firm's culture and collegiality. We encourage firms to evolve along a path that suits them rather than force them down a predesigned route - its not a one size fits all approach. We successfully implemented a solution that allowed practice groups to leverage members of other practice groups (as you can imagine this is no easy task!). We achieved this by giving the practice group donating the staff the cost overhead (through financial trickery) of those members to that practice group, this was the only incentive the group leader needed and it worked very successfully. It gave a number of benefits, it reduced the burnout of overloaded teams and flattened the workload across the firm and it also increased staff retention as a result of a steady workload, who would have thought there could be work/life balance in a law firm.



Do some firms innovate for the sake of innovation – is it all just for show? Are firms transforming for the right reasons or for perceived improvements?

This is an interesting one and one that we come across very regularly. The use of the word innovation has, in recent time, become somewhat of a dirty word. This primarily is because firms are conservative by nature and staunchly unwilling to try something new in fear they will not succeed or it will cause too much change/disruption to the business.

Further to this many of the firms jumped on the coat tails of other firms and dipping their toe into innovation, with little budget and little chance of success, lip service if your will.

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There were a few firms (a number of years ago now) that decided to publicly announce they were going to commit to building an incubator or skunk works to radically change and improve the workings of the business or productise their offerings to improve profitability. Of all the innovation effort given across the industry I can probably count on 2 hands successful and truly innovative solutions. I think the industry needs to focus on change and iterative improvement rather than jump all the way to that dirty word.



If you could invent one thing what would it be and how would it work / function?

Fusion reactor to create 100% free electricity

How can we help a firm through an RFP and ensure they are not hypnotised by the halo effect?

We have provided firms with many RFP selection projects. It is a hugely customised process and customised to the firm, one size does not fit all. We have seen firms select the same product as firms we have engaged with basing their assumption that they have already done the due diligence. This is definitely not the case and a full RFP should be undertaken by every firm to ensure their product selection is correct for their needs. We find that when entering into this process you need to be very mindful

of getting the complete engagement of ALL subject matter experts and senior management. Without complete engagement you will find it very difficult to properly elicit the requirements of the new acquisition but also unable to hold the vendors accountable on all fronts. It also allows us to present the benefits to the business in a manner that doesn't instil a halo effect to occur, we make sure they are very grounded on what it is they are getting and keep them laser focused on what a successful product (and implementation) look like.

How do we bridge the gaps between vendors and firms and how we can help describe a firms culture to the vendor to help them bespoke their solutions.

Even though Altruistic Ventures maintains a fierce independence and is vendor agnostic

to achieve the best outcomes for our clients we maintain strong relationships with most vendors. This helps enormously when having to bridge the gap between firm and vendor and increases the chance of success enormously. We will always convey to the vendor the personality of the firm and their change and risk profiles to ensure the solution marries up with the business.

What inspiration can firms take from outside legal?

There are a huge number of methodologies and techniques used across other industries that are very honed and provide enormous benefit to their respective industries. A culture of curiosity and a willingness to continually educate themselves on how others are doing it can massively help improve efficiencies and possibly change the operating model of a law firm.

If you had a fantasy dinner party who would you invite (dead or alive)

David Attenborough, Brian Cox, Leonardo Da Vinci, Jesus (to prove he doesn't exist), Albert Einstein

Do law firms use their vendor selection as virtue signalling to attract certain clients? Does it give the perception that they are en vogue and techy or is it just a shiny toy that nobody ends up playing with?

Most IT systems in a law firm are heavily under utilised or poorly implemented. I don't think the tech stack that they have is an incentive per se for a prospective client. What will attract the client is the way the firm used tech (not the tech itself) to help drive transparent efficiency and benefit to them.

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