

Law Departments - Voting Software: Beneficial, Versatile, Easy to Use, Yet Often Overlooked (12/11/02 RWM)

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Electronic voting software is an under-utilized tool for law department managers. But it can help choose and implement software, set strategic goals, assess client and employee satisfaction, enliven retreats, and even evaluate outside counsel. This versatile tool deserves more attention than most pay it.

Several systems, such as Option Finder by Option Technologies Interactive, are on the market. Systems can be purchased or licensed for a day or two, and include a combination of software and wireless keypads. Since many companies already own voting pads and software for the voting systems, law departments have an opportunity to use the technology in the various ways.

The System

Each voting system fundamentally operates the same way.

Meeting participants each have a registered keypad. Organizers prepare a set of questions and response choices, typically in yes/no or multiple-choice format. During the meeting, questions and response choices are projected onto a large screen. Participants choose an answer and punch in the corresponding number on the hand-held keypad.

The system allows participants to change their selection at any time until the voting ends. The software tracks their responses and projects a running total on the screen. Once each participant has voted or the organizer decides to end the voting, the software projects a graph of the results as a bar chart or scatter-gram.

Voting software is easy to operate-it takes less than two minutes to train people to use it-and can be used in small or large meetings. It keeps people actively involved in meetings, offers instant feedback, provides an efficient means for gathering information, and facilitates discussion.

Unlike written surveys taken after a meeting, voting software allows organizers to ask a question and immediately tailor follow-up questions based on the responses. This may require flexibility on the part of organizers since the agenda can shift once responses are registered and explored.

In one of our consulting projects, a law department held an off-site retreat where one of the topics was morale.

A series of voting selections helped clarify the issues that department members faced. Additionally, it allowed a successive narrowing of topics so focus groups could concentrate on the most important drivers of morale.

Client satisfaction projects can also use voting software.

With a pharmaceutical company client, we presented the results of a client-satisfaction survey and invited the participants - more than 70 lawyers - to vote on various techniques that would improve satisfaction measures.

The participants appreciated the software because it was easy to use and it provided instant gratification allowing them immediately to see how their colleagues felt.

Technology and Planning

Another way to use voting software is when considering investments in technology.

If department members are presented with a series of questions about how they use software, what they would like software to do, and how most effectively to increase its usage, tremendous insights can be gained in a short period of time.

The same metrics can be obtained by circulating a hard-copy survey or using one of the online survey tools,

of course, but nothing beats the immediacy of feedback in real time. Likewise, if a law department is evaluating several competing software systems, voting software can help make the decision.

In the context of a strategic planning effort or the development of a mission or vision statement, there are additional uses of voting software.

It fits perfectly with scenario planning, under which a department assesses the likelihood of different circumstances occurring. For example, the department members might vote on the likelihood of economic contraction, a significant reorganization of the business, or a shift in senior management.

Here, as with all voting, no one can tell who voted how. Confidentiality is completely assured. But this does not mean questions cannot be posed to voters about themselves so the data can be more finely analyzed. In one consulting project for an insurance company, for instance, we asked for votes about common processes and divided the respondents into lawyers and paralegals. The data was then displayed according to those two categorizations.

Other Benefits

Voting software also can be used to compile evaluations of outside counsel.

A set of questions will enable lawyers to rate outside counsel quickly and efficiently, always using the same scales and definitions.

Voting software can evaluate cost-cutting options, too. Cost control drives many management initiatives these days. Law department members can vote on the likelihood of a series of actions saving money and they can vote on the degree to which they support taking those actions.

Every person who participates enjoys the same privileges of importance. The most junior lawyer can weigh in on a decision with as much impact as a general counsel.

Since voting is confidential, people are more likely to give honest, accurate responses. Voting software alleviates the self-consciousness involved when asked to vote by raising a hand during a meeting.

Voting software can also tell organizers whether they have omitted an important selection. If each question has a choice for "other", organizers can judge by the number of "other" votes whether they have caught the points that appeal to people.

The software stores all results and allows the data to be exported to a spreadsheet for further analysis. Graphs can be printed or copied to word processing or presentation documents.

Practical Considerations

There are a few practical considerations when using voting software.

It takes time to prepare the questions, load them onto the system and make sure the voting pads are functioning properly.

There are also limitations to these systems. Keypad constraints limit the number of response choices to 10. But this can be easily worked around by asking more than one screen of questions with different choices.

Moreover, the systems do not allow participants to register more than one vote on a particular question. Therefore, if an organizer wants to identify the most important factor and the second most important factor to a group, two questions and response choices must be used.

But these are minor inconveniences compared to the benefits of using voting software.

Virtually every aspect of managing a law department or law firm can benefit from the use of voting software. It is confidential, gathers feedback quickly, builds consensus, and - perhaps most off all - often provides a level of entertainment much appreciated at corporate meetings.

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