

MERIDIUS MATTERS

Firm in Focus — Lathrop Gage LLP



Gillian Power
Chief Information Officer

On achieving the promise of IT-driven process automation, enhancing IP practice efficiency, and key requirements for vendors who truly want to be “trusted partners.”

Thanks for taking the time to talk with me today, Gillian. Over the years, we've spoken frequently about IT innovation, change management, and the related intersection of policy, process and people. Today we'll be continuing that dialogue in a slightly more public context.

To start, can you introduce yourself, share a bit about your role at Lathrop Gage and how you frame your personal approach to executing it?

Of course. I've been the Chief Information Officer at Lathrop Gage for nearly seven years. We are a mid-sized firm in the Am Law 200, with around 235 attorneys and 10 offices.

Fundamentally, I focus on anticipating the future needs of the firm, and being ready to move in an assured way, with a team bringing the right tools and skills to bear to respond rapidly when those needs manifest.

You really have to adopt a visionary approach — it's a sense of: "What are the forces that are yet to come? In what direction is this moving? Where is value going to be realized?"

And then thinking about the operational platform — that includes the technology and people, and their competencies — that can be very responsive when the needs actually arise.

I take an active role. What I have to do is to educate and shape the internal narrative that becomes the framework that people use to think about value.

The lawyers are focused on client care. I have to look deeper beneath that, to say: "What are the underlying trends? Where do we need to start positioning resources to be ready?"

There is a lot of listening. Really, listening, thinking and planning that goes into it. Fundamentally, I don't like being reactive. My aim is to be thoughtfully proactive. And that's essentially what I've been doing for a long time.

This approach also allows us to see and often realize an early-mover advantage, particularly when new products or approaches come on the market.

Putting Theory into Practice

Can you share an example and walk us through how this comes together in practice?

Let's take our IP practice as a good example. IP prosecution is a high-volume, transactional practice where a preponderance of the work is done on a fixed-fee arrangement. And it's highly detailed, with exacting requirements, and considerable risk for the firms if those requirements aren't met in the representation of the clients.

That combination of factors creates a practice, from a support point of view, that needs outstanding processes. It needs well-trained people. It needs solid automations. And it needs an approach of continuous improvement to continue to deliver efficiency in the way that the work is done. The requirements also change, and have to be adopted and assimilated into the way that people work.

So, from a technology point of view, it's actually perfect practice to really bring in some incredible systems from an efficiency point of view because a lot of the work is repetitious, or there are big parts of the work that are repetitious. So that gives rise to a lot of automation possibilities as well. It's all about maintaining the efficient flow of the work and the way that it's being handled.

And that's exactly why we make strategic technology investments in this arena. Over the last five to six years, my technology services department has developed significant competence in supporting our IP practice to advance their efficiency.

And a large part of that assistance has come through close partnership with an IP-specialist vendor partner that's delivered a product suite and consulting services that have really augmented and supported automation and efficiency within the practice.

How has that partnership played out in practice, in terms of connecting with your goals and approach as CIO?

We've been working with Aurora North Software, utilizing their product suite, which augments and supports automation and efficiencies within the practice. And taking advantage of their significant experience and understanding of how to optimize the day-to-day execution of IP prosecution in law firm environments.

They're doing exactly what a strategic consultant should do, which was to start with gaining a strong understanding of our firm and needs. That took the form of an assessment and analysis exercise.

That looked at our challenges in their full context—as a systems issue—systems meaning not just technology, but also the policy, process and personnel issues in the mix. And then taking a systemic approach to working out where improvements should be made, in a sequence that can be developed and executed upon most effectively, for greatest impact.

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Vendor Views: Trust, but Verify

I'm really interested in the question of what makes a good vendor in the mind of a CIO. Everyone wants to be a "strategic" or "trusted" partner, which you read on so many web sites. What's really required from a vendor to achieve this in your eyes?

It's not rocket science. It's relationships. It's trust. It's holding the best intentions with the client. Coming forward with suggestions and ideas on ways to help in other areas that aren't purely focused on selling more.

It definitely requires sharing ideas openly and freely. That's probably the distinguishing factor because the intention is to serve us —it should be a "giving" relationship as oppose to just being a reactive or a "taking" relationship.

Some vendors end up being exploitative and cultivating a dependency relationship where they look to trap their clients.

How does this play out in terms of your relationship with Aurora North?

I would say that the distinguishing thing about working with Aurora North is that they simply care, and they care at a very fundamental level about the success of their clients. They go far beyond what we ask of them and offer themselves to us as true and trusted strategic advisers. And in several respects they are helping us chart the evolution of this firm, providing immense insight and value.

Here's a good illustration — they actually have technologies and products that we haven't bought from them, because they've looked at our specific environment and said: "You're not ready for that piece. We need to take care of the other piece of process, or this other people challenge. It's more important to do that first than to implement more software just yet."

I mean that goes to integrity. That goes to really, really having the client's interests at heart in the guidance and counsel that they're providing. And that trust and partnership just makes for incredibly positive working relationship with them.

A Firm View on Client Success

It's a really nice model and example. It's beyond transactional, and it harmonizes with the kinds of approaches firms are trying to take with their own clients — understanding context, being more embedded and aligned with their actual day-to-day and long term challenges.

Exactly. One of the defining characteristics Aurora North is that their business model is not focused on seeking dependency from their clients. It's just the opposite — they're very interested in empowering the firm to operate more efficiently and advance their internal capabilities. And they have provided significance strategic input around the management of the IP Practice, how interplays with the technology and the processes. And they've become really quite indispensable in the entire mix for us.

And that really sums it up. They're an absolute joy to work with. Their people are impeccable and conduct



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themselves with integrity and professionalism. And to the extent that it matters, they're just really fun to work with as well. There's no strain. There's no difficulty in working with them, which given the pressures within the IP arena and the challenges and the stresses, does make a tangible difference in the way that we go about addressing challenging issues and tackling complex projects.

Eyes Seeing IP

I'd like to revisit our earlier themes about innovation ask you to share a sense of how the results have played out across your IP practice. Can you share some detail? What results are you seeing and how is the firm responding?

Our lawyers and staff have definitely noticed and been appreciative of the overall improvements to and support of IP prosecution.

Overall, the efficiency in the practice has risen, and importantly from a business point of view this has allowed the firm to continue to scale and bring on bigger clients with even larger portfolios of work to manage.

It's fair to say that our collaboration with Aurora North and the joint work has been a key underpinning allowing the practice to scale and grow revenue and grow margin and overall operational efficiency.

You started by talking about the role of a CIO as preparing for the future. How does this experience fit into your vision for the future?

I'd say from my perspective, as the CIO, our experience improving IP prosecution has developed a set of people and internal competencies that can be applied to other practice areas.



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We're now so much more able to look at other practice groups outside of IP with complex operational challenges and automation opportunities and move rapidly to deliver new solutions to them.

It's all based on the muscle and the competency that we developed through our support of the IP practice. So that experience has a "spin off" benefit from that point of view.

Right. What you're talking about is a bit of a beachhead strategy. I love the muscle building analogy as part of that. It's about developing the capacity to effect change. And since the organization has already been through that journey and experienced success, they're much more open to embracing what's next.

So, what is next on this front for you?

We have a lot aspirations in regard. Our firm has recently implemented a new practice group structure, which is giving rise to very focused discussions with practice group leaders about opportunities for technology and process enhancement.

Given our track record, I can confidently have those conversations with practice group leaders because I know that the underlying competency platform within IT exists to be able to take those ideas and they can see live examples of that success.

There are some great ideas all around — many of which are focused on improving the client experience in very tangible and exciting ways.

In terms of getting into more specifics beyond that, well, I'll just say you have to wait and see. The next time we sit down for a catch up, I should have some interesting and compelling updates to share.

I'll definitely plan to take you up on that offer! Thank you again for speaking with me today.

It was my pleasure. 

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About

Meridius Matters is a publication of Meridius LLC.

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