UBS and Credit Suisse Outside Counsel Management Integration: AI-Powered Optimization with UnitedLex and Legal Decoder

The Challenge

Following UBS's acquisition of Credit Suisse, its legal team was tasked with consolidating the company's legal matters and external law firms into a one unified organization. Integration following a merger is always a multifaceted task, but this one was especially complicated due to the issues of the acquired entity. "Credit Suisse was going through some turmoil," explained John Burke, head of outside counsel management at UBS. "Swiss government stepped in and basically asked UBS to see if we could salvage them or save them, and we ended up inheriting a large portfolio of litigation matters with enormous spend associated with them." Noting that a few years prior UBS, faced with reducing costs, had implemented a practice — engaging in-house counsel, outside counsel and consultants — of looking at the top 15 matters in a litigation which represented the majority of spend, and how those matters were staffed. "Through this exercise we were able to reduce costs significantly," said Burke." So, when Credit Suisse happened, we said, 'hey, let's do the same kind of exercise, but do it bigger."

To "do it bigger," and review 25 matters, for example, UBS knew it needed a partner. "We realized very early that we didn't have the in-house expertise to be able to handle the amount of data analysis and analytics that needed to be done," said Burke. "We needed some expert outside help to be able to staff it quickly and get it done quickly, but also bring the expertise to bear, so that's why we reached out to Chris at UnitedLex.

UnitedLex had previously been engaged with Credit Suisse, developing its outside counsel management framework. With the merger underway, it made sense to realign the scope of the partnership to include analyzing legal spend, identifying inefficiencies, and recommending strategic improvements to integrate outside counsel management processes post-merger. "We had some familiarity already with the Credit Suisse portfolio," explained Christopher Ochs, vice president, outside counsel management, at UnitedLex. "We had a preliminary understanding of where things stood, and a partnership with Legal Decoder — a tool that allows us to study line-item billing data."

The Solution & Outcome

With Legal Decoder, UnitedLex was able to "build a road map of everything that's happening

in terms of staffing, workflow, and billing hygiene based on 10s of thousands, and in some cases, over 100,000 individual line items that timekeepers enter from the law firm side," said Ochs. "Because of the speed at which the merger and the integration was happening, we needed to leverage the tool and access data quickly, and we needed to be able to measure everything."

Together, the UBS Outside Counsel Management Team and UnitedLex, utilizing the technology from Legal Decoder, did in fact conduct comprehensive analysis of the top 25 legal matters comprising a majority of the spend, using detailed line-item billing data. "Part of the mission here was to take an objective approach; to depersonalize the conversations so that nobody on the outside counsel side felt like this was a referendum on the quality of the lawyering," said Joseph Tiano, CEO of Legal Decoder. "It was simply a benchmark approach to looking at what happened, who did it, how much did it cost, and how long did it take. And, with the volume of data that had to be crunched, it was necessary to use a programmatic approach. Legal Decoder came in and became sort of a programmatic method, behind the initial data analysis," he said.

Going through these matters is time-consuming and being able to better prioritize attorney time is critical for any legal department, as is standardization of processes, consistency, and the objectivity in managing outside relationships. This is where leaning into the right technology can make all the difference. "The benefit of using technology here, is it doesn't get tired," said Tiano. "It can do a lot of data analysis very quickly, and it used a very standard and objective approach so that all the outside counsel were getting evaluated based on essentially an equal footing." He continued, "Of course, technology could only get you so far in the sense that there's always a story behind the data."

That story, according to the CEO, tells what happened, how it happened, who worked on what, and how efficiently — and informs decision-making and potential changes to the legal department which allow it to be a better partner to the business. As a result, UBS identified opportunities to improve staffing models, fee arrangements, and billing practices. In addition, the data supported recommendations to realign staffing, optimize fee structures, improve billing hygiene, and streamline workflows. Following implementation of these new processes, UBS saw a 25 percent reduction in legal spend across the top 25 legal matters in 2024 and established a more data-driven approach to managing outside counsel.

Keys to Success

 "I think the number one thing that allowed us to be successful was engaging with the in-house counsels early, telling them what the overall plan was; the objective, and telling them that we were going to use the data-driven analysis, so that it wasn't going to be subjective and accusatory," said Burke detailing how the partners went about getting buy-in from the department. The data analyzing the bills received during the last 12 months was clearly presented for the involved attorneys, the communication was frequent and inclusive, and

their willingness to collaborate and lean into a new process was acknowledged.

"I think they appreciated the transparency early on," Burke said. "They appreciated being part of the process. They appreciated being copied on the emails to the law firms and being engaged with the conversations with the law firms so that they weren't excluded. They were part of the team and ultimately, they were recognized by the general counsel for their contribution and collaboration."

"It was almost like a sense of validation that the approach we took was the right approach," continued Ochs. "We all put a lot of work into this project, and we were all very confident in our approach; what we're doing and in the work product we were producing. But when you still you have lawyers reviewing it — many, many lawyers reviewing it — you know there's going to be some discussions. Everything stood up that was under tremendous scrutiny, and I would say it validates the approach, this data-driven approach to building these strategies and managing a portfolio of matters in law firms."

Getting Started with an AI-Powered Solution

"Any litigation matter that's over $1,000,000 spend has opportunities for cost savings," said Burke. "I would start small, maybe start with [looking at] the top five matters. Just take a closer look at how they're staffed. He recommends asking a few initial questions to get started, including:

1. Who are the law firms involved?
2. Who are the consultants involved?
3. Who are the experts involved?

Once your team answers those questions, analyze the data from the last 12 months. "It'll be eye opening," said Burke. "Then that'll trigger a conversation with the law firm, and when the law firm realizes that you're taking that kind of scrutiny to those matters, things start to tighten up; things start to improve."