



Member Case Study

ILFM member Shirley Rothel, Head of Finance & Operations at Just Cost Solicitors was named Compliance Officer of the Year at the 2014 Modern Law Awards. Legal Abacus asked Shirley about her role and her key tips for success...

As part of my experience and progression from being a Legal Cashier right through to Director and COFA, I believe that being accessible and then understanding the whole of the Finance function, is integral to the success of the COFA role.

Without understanding not only the significance of the compliance and risk of the practice, but the day to day financial activities the role would be difficult to develop and manage.

My role has not changed a great deal since the introduction of COFA as most of the practices required were being completed anyway. Compliance, risk management and team integration and development were always high on my agenda.

Having a good team who understand the implications and obligations, is key to COFA and business success. I trust and rely upon my close team to ensure that day to day, we do what is necessary. I enjoy our team meetings and it ensures there is integration from the junior members upwards.

Being head of operations as well as finance definitely gives me the edge I need to make sure we have the best processes in place. I would say I am a nuisance when it comes to system development and I make our head of IT run for the hills on a regular basis due to the constant tweaks and upgrades I request! Seriously though, I am very proud of the systems we operate. Years of development, reviews and audits have enabled us to fine tune our output of data. That is not to say it is by any means perfect, there is always room to improve.

I was nominated in 2012 for this award and came "runner up" and was highly commended. The 2012 nomination came about because we had had a clean SRA review at the end of 2012.

2013 turned out to be an even more productive year, during which I facilitated a 25% increase in the business funding, allowing us the opportunity to develop and grow the business further. We also secured another clean audit. I was nominated and then thrilled to receive the award against strong nominees.

The award is testament to the full team though and not just one individual. Winning it has confirmed the strength of the people and systems we have in place. I hope it has also increased our client's confidence when sending instructions to [Just Costs](#).

It has also made me reflect on what it is that makes the role successful. This will be different for every appointed COFA, but for me and the business it is a combination of many things, these I see are key though:

1. **Experience.** I have over 30 years experience in legal accounts. I started at the bottom and worked my way up. The experience of working up from office junior through to COFA and head of finance and operations, really has enabled me to perform the role.
2. **A strong team.** I have an excellent team around me and most of them have been with me for over 3 years now. I have always been available to help develop and train them and to enhance their knowledge and skills. This is vital.

- 3. System management.** I am a bit of control freak when it comes to systems, reports and general attention to detail. I would not be able to operate if I didn't have the confidence in our IT and those managing it. Report and software development is vital to keep in line with all the requirements of the role. It is important I have confidence in the criteria and data produced.
- 4. Expecting mistakes will happen.** Whilst there is confidence in the systems and processes, we are dealing with people and not machines. Mistakes will happen. It is being able to deal with these in a pragmatic and sympathetic way and at the same time there is an improvement to the process to avoid future mistakes. I am also mindful of ensuring not to knock a person's confidence in their ability.
- 5. Accessible.** I think it is really important that I make myself available to anyone who has a problem or an issue they want to talk through. My door is always open.

