

3Kites' Five Year View of Legal IT An article for The KnowList blog

Having been asked to provide a view of how IT might change over the next five years, I sat down to think of what influences there might be on technology in that time. Obvious areas for technological development include the evolution of iPads and the like into something approaching true electronic paper and, on the same theme, enhanced voice recognition replacing the virtual keyboards on such devices. Television will continue to move away from aerial/dish received transmissions and onto the web, whilst battery technology will support unfettered (by the mains) use of ever larger appliances such as printers. Communicating via social networking tools will be so prevalent that our closest friends and confidantes will be people we have never actually met – and we will be sharing information and knowledge in an unstructured (but hopefully searchable) way. And just as we all jump into our flying cars in our stay-clean suits with George Jetson and the rest of the crew, robots will start to become commercially available.

So, where does this leave most of our law firms which have traditionally been wary of working with the very latest in technology? Actually, I think the real seismic shift in legal IT will not come in the shape of new technology, but rather in the commercial issues that will drive the sector to embrace existing technologies ever more tightly. The two main factors here will be the economy (regardless of whether or not this is a double dip, its effects will probably be felt in lower fee rates for years to come) and the Legal Services Act (with new entrants to the sector likely to demand ever greater efficiencies to fuel the return on their investment).

It was always difficult to implement major changes in law firms when the pain of not doing something was trumped by the money rolling in through the door. The cautionary tale for IT Heads of walking into a room full of millionaires and trying to tell them they are doing it all wrong was never more true than at the height of the economic boom, but those days are truly behind us and we might wait a long time to see their return. That's not to say that we will see swathes of lawyers serving at McDonalds any time soon, but the reality is that these seismic changes are enough of a threat to the sector to make the law firms sit up and listen. They want to know how to do things more efficiently to recapture (protect?) margins, to cater for new fee arrangements, to keep up with the competition.

Many of these efficiencies could be driven by better use of the mature technologies firms already have in place. Document management, fully implemented, could help firms move towards a position where master files for clients and matters are held electronically allowing lawyers to share consistent and (more or less) complete versions of documentation. Been done already? Really? Just how many firms do you know where the lawyers AND the secretaries have truly taken e-Filing on and made it work. Well now is the time to push ahead with e-Filing - the need to be practical remains (paper files are still easier to work with in meetings), but there are ways to work around this.

The same case can be made for client relationship management, practice management, and knowledge management (which, ideally, should be embedded in all of the other initiatives here). However, the legal technology area that I think will grow most in the next few years will be that of business process automation. This is where most efficiencies are likely to be gained - using BPM, workflow, document assembly or the like to improve the way that firms run whole processes (such as the inception of matters) or, more realistically, parts of processes (such as taking instructions from clients and turning these into first draft documents).

As with the other solutions mentioned above, this area is not new but it is likely to be one of the main beneficiaries of a previously suspicious sector. It will power the move to unbundle the legal process and automate those parts that happen over and over without trying to dumb down the work of the lawyer... which is sort of what the client came to the law firm for in the first place. And some of the tools that drive this change can provide an added bonus. They can also help to integrate solutions so that the Achilles heel (of duplicate input, inconsistent data and the like) that often blighted an IT strategy based on best of breed can be resolved by a more joined up approach.

Don't get me wrong - it's not that I don't see technical innovation in law firms over the next five years. I feel sure that iPads will help deliver e-Filing (eg by replacing paper files in meetings and at court) as surely as better use of document management will. It's just that I think most of what we'll see will be about using what was already under our noses... but using it a whole lot better.

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