

## USING I.T. TO REDUCE COSTS AND INCREASE EFFICIENCY

In order to be efficient, law firms should regularly review the role of I.T. in their practice. This article does not concern itself with expensive technologies. Instead, the ideas covered should be freely available to you or will not require substantial investment.

### **Secretary or no secretary**

A frequent dilemma for firms is whether it is more efficient to hire secretaries to assist caseworkers or whether they should be self servicing.

Whether solicitors are more efficient working with the use of a secretary is predominantly a mathematical calculation. If the firm can recover the cost of employing the administrative staff through increased fees, then it is usually worthwhile to have such staff. Other considerations would also include the culture of the firm, caseworkers' skills and the quality of available administrative staff.

The self service route has become more popular partly because younger caseworkers are increasingly familiar with office software and many are able to type at a reasonable speed.

Irrespective of whether caseworkers enjoy the benefit of having a secretary, it is clearly an enormous advantage if they know how to use basic modern technology efficiently. Let's take the example of word processor software. There are an enormous number of keyboard shortcuts that accompany most programs and the frequent use of Autocorrect can save a typist's time by being manipulated to produce phrases, sentences and even paragraphs at the touch of a button. So, no more typing "Dear Sir/Madam", "Yours faithfully" or even

"Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries" etc. These can all be replaced by a shortcut code such as 'ds', 'yf' and 'pd' which once typed and followed by the space bar, tab or return key will result in the whole sentence appearing.

For commonly used addresses, long paragraphs or even groups of paragraphs, the AutoText tool can be used. Other features that are useful include Macros and Track Changes.

### **Can't Type Won't Type**

Regardless of tools that make typing easier, there will always be some solicitors who choose not to or cannot type. There are also situations where it is not possible to type. Here, the use of an electronic pad is an alternative method.

Quite simply, the user writes using an adapted pen onto conventional paper held by what appears to be a clipboard. Once the user has finished writing, the pad connects to a PC or Laptop and the notes appear on screen within a matter of seconds. A test-run on someone else's pad or at a shop selling these devices would see if it could work for you.

### **Can't Write Either**

Many organisations have continued to use secretaries but have moved to digital dictation. This has proved to be a popular technology as dictation files can easily be emailed to secretaries and it is also easy to manage document queues.

Some solicitors have chosen to outsource their secretarial services and email their digital dictation to a third party provider, which can be located in the UK or abroad.

Some firms have also experimented with the use of voice recognition software. This takes digital dictation one step further by using software to 'type' the words recorded on the digital Dictaphone. The technology has improved significantly over the past few years and software now available is often able to recognise even the strongest of accents.

### **The Joy of Text**

Text messaging is being used by law firms who want to minimise 'no shows' by reminding clients of their appointment. Others use it to remind clients to bring important documents or to get important messages to clients such as to ascertain why a client is not at court. Text messaging is less intrusive than a phone call. Thus, a client late for court is more likely to read a text than to accept a call.

There is no need to use personal mobiles to send texts. An alternative and cost effective method is to send texts using the internet.

### **Seeing clients virtually**

Some solicitors have purchased video conferencing facilities in order that they can advise their client without the need to travel. Like many other technologies, the cost of such systems has declined to such a degree that they are within the reach of most firms and the cost is often outweighed by time/cost savings. Many clients have computers at home and using a webcam is a realistic alternative. When using webcams, there tends to be less small talk and more focus on dealing with the crux of the matter.

### **The future**

In a few years time, it's possible that clients and law firms will arrange to meet online in a virtual world such as Second Life, an online community of approximately 1 million virtual residents who through a virtual avatar spend time meeting other virtual people and spending virtual money.

This unconventional and futuristic medium is a possible method of providing advice and services to clients who find it difficult to access or who might not otherwise access your services. The law firm Field Fisher Waterhouse has a presence in Second Life for this very reason.

### **Coming back to Earth**

There continues to be significant advances in technology and no doubt new ways of becoming more efficient will be available in the market place. What won't change though is the need to continually review the use of I.T. in order to ensure you are using the most efficient technologies in your firm.

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