

In the machine: legal technology

Eduardo Reyes sees steep potential, but little action, in one corner of legal IT

INSTRUCTING LAWYERS REMAINS AN INTENSELY personal business, and so it seems is the process of 'creating' advice. It is not that technology hasn't had an effect, it has, but as research for the client's guide to the legal market, *The Legal 500* (published by the same stable as *IHL*), draws to a close, it is clear that a law firm's USP is rarely a technical one. Corporate clients paying top sterling/dollar/euro for advice aren't praising virtual deal rooms, or the fact that their advisers have BlackBerries. It is a long time since the ability to save typing time by going to 'cut and paste' in Microsoft Word marked a lawyer out as a modern adviser. Instead, when asked open questions, clients praise a lawyer for being willing to 'give a steer' in a difficult area, willingness to help with an early assessment of a situation that could turn litigious, insight, commercial sense, project management skills, responsiveness, and creativity. As Mark Harding, Barclays' general counsel, pointed out two years ago, in an age when you will be able to fit 'the amount of information in a corporation today into something the size of a glass of water', there will still be a role for the trusted adviser.

NEW CHANNELS

The legal industry has required some regulatory changes, but has adapted well, if unremarkably, to the changing technological patina of our age. It has meant advances in project management - including case management of litigation. It has enabled in-house counsel and law firms to monitor service levels and process as never before. IT may also have enabled lawyers to get up to speed more easily with the context in which their advice should be placed. Certainly, credible claims are made for the financial and process gains

made from effective e-billing. In-house counsel may also find it easier to gain the 'dashboard' knowledge they need in a specialist area to cross-examine the legal advice they are paying for. Although clients have always liked a responsive lawyer who gets back to them with an early 'steer' on a problem, in many cases mobile technology, such as the ubiquitous BlackBerry, has increased the pressure for more informal advice.

CONTENT TO CLICK

So, as with much new technology, the platforms are useful, though not as revolutionary as the platform providers would have you believe. As the 'creatives' point out in the media context, it is content that counts.

No one, though, expected the legal sector to pave the way in new uses for technology. However, there are some IT tools being launched that may have some applicability here. Two in particular relate to how legal advisers are chosen, and were launched by entrepreneurs with a reasonable track record in 'brokering' or 'broking'.

The first to go live is titled Bview (www.bview.com) and is aimed at individual consumers and businesses of all sizes, providing space for anyone with direct experience of a business to post their comments on its service levels, and add information on how key staff were to deal with. The credit ratings of 2.5 million businesses have also been made available for free on the site. It mostly seems aimed at individual consumers and anyone trying to make an assessment about either the skills of a small unbranded business or the ability of a main contractor to pay sub-contractors on time. But commercial law firms are also there -

mid-size Clarke Willmott of Bristol was on one demonstration screen. There are corporations who like to use every kind of firm, from Herbert Smith to a high-street conveyancer in Wolverhampton. So there is potential herein, giving some consumer certainty for providers who are too small to have a brand.

A second initiative comes from Dr Yuri Rapoport, who set up a legal advice brokering service in Australia and has now launched 'Rapoport's Directory', the structure of which allows a consumer to search for a lawyer by criteria such as who the lawyer has acted against. Again, it seems of most use in finding advisers with whom the client does not have a connection, and who have not been able to market themselves by other means.

Neither initiative is there yet. But both should be watched. In other sectors, IT has changed markets, and the selection of counsel is one area where it has simply made access to information faster - the process hasn't altered.

Speed of a process counts, though, in opening up a market. If it cuts the time an investor waits to make a profit, it is the difference between viability and disaster. And with legal services soon to be opened up to outside investors, the relevance of any such initiative may be greater than it seems.

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