

Lawyers tap technology to increase their firm's effectiveness

Professional services firms of all kinds place a premium on client service, and yet they sometimes fail to gear their information technology to the task at hand: satisfying clients and achieving client objectives.

The two are not the same, but as clients know, both matter. Clients can be satisfied when their objectives are met, but not always. Think of the client objective as the goal line: creating tax savings, winning a case, negotiating a tough deal. Client satisfaction, on the other hand, can be more subtle: was the goal achieved in a timely fashion? Did the client constituent get the warning he needed for the bumps along the way? Was the client's day-to-day experience informed? Was the budget met or revised prudently and without surprise?

Satisfying Client Objectives

While legal services differ by type, subject matter and the size of problems, client objectives boil down to a few constants: business people want to be practically informed (not lectured), they want pragmatic legal solutions, and they want to be well represented in deals and disputes. These are measurable client objectives. The role of technology in this area boils down to two things: helping the legal team process data, and effectively communicating. Period. Effective Technology contributes to the result of the legal problem either by reducing costs or increasing revenue to the client (by reducing an obligation or gaining revenue).

Data processing technology

Law is fundamentally an information business – amassing and extruding data through a legal maze. Effective tools for this are not optional. Not on the billable hour (which 90 percent of law firm services are billed by). Harnessing hardware, software, know-how and databases is essential for delivering clients the best value. Firms that don't invest their own money in IT are robbing their clients: their time to complete tasks is inflated, and their work product isn't as good as it can be when you pair good lawyers with a smart tech platform.

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EXPERT VIEW

Richard Vasquez

overhead and sets up the law firm to deliver world class communications which form the foundation for top-class advocacy, high-touch client collaborations and better client understanding of what they are paying for.

Our law firm has deployed technology solutions in data processing to great effect in litigation, case management, document management, document creation and comparison.

The simplest to describe is the "trial in a wireless laptop." In a recent case, our co-counsel adorned the courtroom with between six and 10 lawyers for each client, and literally wheeled in dollies filled with banker's boxes stuffed with documents. We handled it with two attorneys and two laptops. The laptops were outfitted with two wireless systems to connect to our law firm servers. Our evidence – video and documents, literally hundreds of thousands – were also redundantly housed on our hard drives. Counsel instant messaged throughout trial, and deployed specialized presentation software to the courtroom on a 64-square-foot screen, toggling adeptly through evidence retraceable in seconds. Our client testified while "driving" his own laptop, in real time Internet aerial map flyovers to depict 30-year-old visual conditions.

Before we get to trial, the starring evidence needs to be discovered out of what can be millions of electronic and paper documents. We combine several tech tools to manage and search that data. First we devise a data collection plan to cover the client's and our opponent's systems. Typically we have the documents imaged and then "base-coded."

We employ in-house high speed scanners, and have an assortment of overseas vendors to process these e-documents efficiently. Then they go into the Summation (link) software "hopper," where our skilled paralegals do next level coding for the issues and witnesses in the case. Finally, our attorneys

get a crack at the database and can select the key evidence for the case. These are used for deposition examinations.

Once transcripts arrive, we load those into summation and collate testimonial evidence with documents. Finally, "pearls" of the evidence gathering process are uploaded and modeled in our Trial Director (link) program, from which deposition testimony can be accessed for playback to the jury via videotape, blow-up text and blow-up document overlays. These are used in the opening statement, cross-examination and closing statements to illustrate and recall for the jury what they should recall in the

be adopted by all law firms. Last month, RIMM nominated MMB for top prize at the Legal Tech National conference, for what the tech firm called "trail-blazing" custom programming efforts and collaborations with several providers.

A 35-lawyer law firm beating out the 1,000-2,000 lawyer firms in tech investing? But businesses know invention happens in smaller platforms, because they can experiment and adapt more quickly than monolithic organizations.

They can now get to a lawyer when they need him, the lawyer can find the data needed to solve the client's problem and respond

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deliberations room.

These solutions are the product of the firm realizing its mission: satisfying client objectives and amassing and extruding data through the legal maze – in this example a trial. For us, it was yet another example that great client service is inextricably tied to developing and mastering IT solutions that help us deliver better, faster and less expensively.

Communications technology

Other critical tech investments a law firm should be making are communications. This means more than e-mail. For example, Morgan Miller Blair first invested in Research in Motion (RIMM) Blackberry handhelds for all its attorneys six years ago. The payback was so immediate, we kept investing. Today, the devices not only send real-time e-mail, they pull together voice, voice mail, e-mail, legal calendars, real-time document retrieval, dictation and transcription and high speed EDGE Web access, so we can do our jobs better, faster and less expensively.

These business tools have become commonplace amongst big law firms. But only Morgan Miller Blair's Blackberry platform was nominated this year by RIMM for innovative solutions which RIMM says should

via broadband, without the lawyer ever returning to the office.

Law firms that work with international clients, for example, are expected by their clients overseas, or by local clients with overseas operations, to make their key attorneys and partners available on a 24/7, 365 basis and across multiple time zones.

Other initiatives which we have used to advance client service and client objectives in a sophisticated business law practice include routine web video-conferencing for clients and collaborators; large LCD monitors and built in, wirelessly accessible desktop computers hidden in all conference room tables, for paperless meetings; secure WIFI access for all clients and collaborators; remote Citrix desktop access for all attorneys reachable anyplace with an internet connection; and EDGE high speed wireless access cards, for longer work sessions in airports, hotels and taxis.

All of these tools have the only two objectives of private law practice: reaching the goal line and making the client cheer.

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