

Gaining Access

Michelmores LLP is a firm that reflects the green shoots in the legal market, and it has a 'strategy of ambition' that's intertwined with a well-thought out IT strategy.

"We're investing a lot to enable us to meet the needs of a buoyant and changing market," explains the firm's IT Director Simon Clarke. "We're seeing growth in international markets, and technology plays a key role in helping us meet changing demands."

Michelmores recently put focus on the growth and profitability of its new homes sales, for which the business needed "robust, competitive software", says Clarke. "We needed to deliver plot sales with more profitability in a competitive market and help us engage clients better. We chose Linetime's Liberate because it integrated with the firm's existing document management system, Worksite, which means more time saved and better leverage of our Worksite investment."

A better-integrated case tool "is a must-have, now", says Clarke, because it drives down work production costs and therefore drives up profitability and, perhaps more importantly, also improves customer engagement. "We'll also be looking at gross profit margins for work, and I can see it will absolutely help there, too. Before we couldn't analyse costs, but now we can look at the matter from cradle to grave, find and assess the bits that were most time-consuming, and see where we can save costs," he says.

"By componentising a process, we can ensure the right person is doing the right work at the right time. A solicitor does one part, a paralegal another – skills are allocated efficiently and cost effectively. Fundamentally, we have control of the work and costs of the individual components – we couldn't do that before."

Keeping the firm's fees competitive is very important but it's only one reason for better case management. "Software certainly enables us to reach a certain price point – without it, it's just not possible." Clarke says. But clients also want visibility and communication on their own terms, as well as keener pricing. These issues are now a big part of the decision making process, starting right at the beginning of the client relationship.

"Clients ask 'How does this law firm engage? What and how do they communicate?' It's very important, from tender to ongoing engagement – it's part of both winning and keeping clients," Clarke explains. "Clients want to feel that they are communicating and influencing the process, they need visibility and reporting."

Of course, they also want it the way they want it. "In essence, we're helping them with their own internal reporting requirements, because now we create bespoke reports. That's been a big challenge in the past, and now we can meet specific client needs."

"We'll become more efficient, scale more efficiently. The firm's work on new homes sales is growing – we need to control and manage efficiency. We need to deliver work competitively and scale up as we need, leveraging technology allows growth without the need to increase other resources."

Key to the firm's past and future successes is that the business owns the workflow. Creating and managing them isn't an IT function – unless something is particularly tricky or unusual. "We now have two people in the new homes team skilled in workflows, which gives us resilience, and of course they can ask IT if they need."

If IT does the work, he says, there's always "a danger that 'what IT thinks' is created".

"Using a system like Liberate, which gives workflow management power to the users, means you don't have to be an IT expert. It's a much better outcome if the business understands what is possible, and then designs the process around that goal." Plus, says Clarke, it's rare to find development tools that can be consumed by a business user, rather than IT. "It's refreshing."

Customer choice

Michelmores has recently launched Liberate's B2C portal and has plans to leverage the business intelligence features available with the product. Given Clarke's position that customer engagement is the key to winning and keeping clients, it's unsurprising that better use of analytics is on his 'to do' list.

"It's about communicating and reporting. I think it will be a useful part of client experience – building interactions that happen when clients choose." Clients want that to happen, and law firms have no choice but to comply. The new market reality has kicked in – new competition, market consolidation, ABSs – and the penny has dropped: firms need to be competitive, and to change.

"It was a slow-burn change, but we're starting to see it as the recession falls away – clients are investing again, and this time they are asking for law firms to react differently too," says Clarke. "It's not difficult to change a law firm now, and client retention is suddenly a big topic of conversation."

Clients are also demanding availability when they want, not when lawyers choose. "Flexibility and access are critical, and a key requirement that clients are driving." But Clarke says this doesn't just mean giving lawyers more mobile devices. "A laptop or mobile isn't mobility. Giving a client a real option to contact a lawyer in the evenings and on holidays – that is mobility. Technology is the enabler, but it's the cultural change that needs to happen – the objective related to the technology."

He's describing an emerging consumerist attitude in the corporate world, and one that needs to find a place in legal, too. "When you're a consumer, devices and availability are endless, then you move into a corporate scenario and everything is suddenly restrictive."

The legal market is experiencing a fundamental and dramatic viewpoint change, says Clarke. "In legal, technology hasn't been seen as the enabler – but the business is now asking IT for help. I think this is a change that's gaining momentum and importance. Legal businesses are engaging with IT to solve their business issues. At last we're no longer delivering technology solutions – we're delivering a business solution with technology."