

# Disruptive technologies

Law firms should use emerging technologies to boost productivity, says **Greg Wildisen**

It is not that long ago that technology and lawyers seemed about as compatible as oil and water. Many saw the emergence of technologies such as email and time-recording systems as challenges to long cherished ways of working while others regarded technology as a fundamental threat to their business models. Fast forward a few years, and the picture is very different indeed. Formerly late adopters, today many law firms are now ahead of other professionals in their use of technology as they have realised the genuine benefits it can provide for a knowledge industry.

## Progress

Technological progress continues unabated and a range of new tools and systems is again transforming the way that lawyers work. Law firms have already exploited technology as a means for making traditional processes—communicating with clients, time recording and workflow management, for example—much more efficient, but the deployment of information technology is now rapidly moving past this point as new technologies enter the mainstream.

Chief amongst these are so-called “collaborative” technologies which can unlock value by enabling individualistic lawyers to work together in an efficient way. Excellent examples of how technology usage is growing in this area are wikis—web pages that allow people to share content or knowledge. Perhaps the best known example is *Wikipedia*, but in a law firm context, by controlling who can share and update information, wikis can quickly build into an important resource for the firm and greatly enhance the efficiency of knowledge-sharing around the firm. Blogs work in a similar vein, with the key difference being that they are written and maintained by a key participant—usually somebody with specialist knowledge or in a leadership role—and comments are added by other users to what theme the blogger selects.

## Online repositories

A more formal form of knowledge sharing, which have gained ground in the legal industry, are online repositories—similar to an online firm library, but with a much wider variety of information available. In addition to technical information, repositories can include access to ongoing documentation, billing information and useful background information on clients.

## Wikis & blogs

Wikis and blogs are good examples of how to integrate technology into a law firm environment. The technology behind them is not especially innovative, but the way that they are deployed is. Conventional knowledge management systems have been around in the legal profession for some years now, but their success in encouraging lawyers to part with their valuable know-how has been patchy so far and required

**“If systems are to achieve full potential users must engage with them as much as possible”**

law firms to use a fair amount of stick to ensure compliance.

Wikis and blogs by contrast are usually less cumbersome and even fun to use and their benefits are immediately apparent. All the technology in the world will provide no benefit if lawyers—busy people, with a healthy degree of scepticism—cannot be persuaded to use it. The key is to integrate technology seamlessly into lawyers’ working lives, so that its usefulness is apparent. To misquote John F Kennedy, the most effective way to ensure that lawyers work with technology is not to ask: “what can I do for the system” but rather “what can the system do for me?” In a fast-moving business environment, by integrating workflow management with document control, the former enables lawyers to project manage complex pieces of work. It also helps manage potential conflicts of interest much more efficiently, while adding

e-billing capability to the package enables clients to be invoiced much accurately and quickly as well as providing them with greater transparency.

In addition to the budgeting, forecasting and risk management efficiencies they bring, by filtering, analysing and organising the enormous volumes of management and financial information generated by law firms, these systems enable the law firm management to undertake a sophisticated analysis of where they generate revenue—and where they don’t.

## Specialist areas

For more specialist areas such as litigation, another key productivity tool are e-discovery (or disclosure) systems, which enable litigation teams to substantially reduce the amount of time they spend on the document review stage of major litigation cases or regulatory investigations. They do this by progressively whittling down the number of documents that need to be reviewed manually. Now that the vast majority of business documents are now in electronic form, by using a combination

of keyword searching, near de-duplication technology and concept-based clustering tools, e-discovery systems can present the reviewing team with a document set that is manageable, ordered and categorised.

These types of productivity improvements and business management tools are becoming increasingly essential to the future prosperity of law firms. In particular, clients are increasingly asking about e-billing, extranets and direct access to knowledge management as part of panel reviews, while the desire to move away from paying by the hour is putting increased pressure on law firm productivity. They may have been late adopters of technology, but it is now becoming clearer to law firms that technology has a critical role to play in their future success. **NLJ**

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