

NEW FRONTIERS



Richard Roebuck, managing director at Accesspoint, sets out the future of legal technology – and how SME legal managers can prepare for it

The world of legal IT is vast these days, and is advancing at such a pace that many of us are left wondering where to turn and where to head next.

To a large extent, and at a certain level, as IT providers we can sometimes forget our place. The fundamental rule in the application of technology or with business-based technological advancement should be that we apply and develop it to meet the daily business requirements, future ambitions and market forces being applied to our organisations – rather than the business itself attempting to follow the IT department or service provider's strategy.

Perhaps as a sector what we don't do so well is take a step back and look at our own landscape. We have a tendency to avoid looking at sector trends and how they have developed over the past few years – but by taking a better look at those trends and applying or extrapolating our findings, we can outline what our future market may look like. If we fail to at least attempt to understand what the future market may look like, we will absolutely fail to develop a meaningful IT strategy and set of solutions to meet those future demands.

It seems inevitable that solicitors and lawyers face a future of significant change on a varied scale – depending on the areas of law being practised, types of client, geographical location and so on. The one thing that's very safe to say is that 'business as usual' is not an option for many, perhaps for any, traditional legal services provider. Innovation in services provided and service delivery will become a key and significantly differentiating factor.

Over the past couple of years, and in particular within the delivery of business-to-business services, the impact of technology has and still is being felt within firms undertaking volume and process-driven types of work over those firms that are perhaps a little more specialist. Yet it was only a year or so before

when the most common boardroom argument against the rapid advancement of automated caseflow we heard was: "You can't automate what I do."

Now it's absolutely fair to say that not everything a lawyer or business services employee does this? automatable. But don't be fooled – because just like the early adopters who overcame such sentiment there is much more automation to come. Automation has all sorts of consequences – some good, some not.

On the downside, we can and often do see job loss as a result of automation. The one trend I have seen across the significant majority of firms I work with is the absolute decimation of administrative and secretarial resource – and for the most part this has come about either through advancement or by increased use of technology in turn making fee earners more self-sufficient.

On the upside, however, I have seen many secretaries and such similar support personnel upskill themselves and move into the fee-earning environment. So, the news isn't all bad.

Many solicitors going through this transition have told us they found it difficult (usually in no uncertain terms). However, over time things seem to have settled (for the moment) and we have new ratios of administrative to fee-earning staff in play. But I think the future has much more to bring on this.

Like I said, until now the biggest impact or loss from a 'human resource' perspective has been that of admin and secretarial staff. In the future, technology will without doubt cause job loss for certain segments of our fee-earning population as computer systems start to 'interpret and understand' the documents we produce through the use of artificial intelligence. Like the internet at large, the impact of AI within the legal world will be profound.

AI is a current reality and is perhaps further down the development road than many may actually think. As they say ... watch this space. [LPM](#)





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