



# DOT ON THE HORIZON

Richard Roebuck, managing director at Accesspoint, tells a story of an SME law firm failing to get to grips with its IT and what your firm can learn from it

Firms often look to stories of success to learn new ways of working, but perhaps most hard-hitting would be to learn from the firms that fail.

Good technology is the basis of any well-functioning business in the 21st century – as competition becomes tighter with new technology capabilities, now really isn't the time to be sitting on your laurels.

The ramifications are huge, says Richard Roebuck, managing director at Accesspoint.

“When the wheels come off and things go wrong, it's quite serious. For law firms, especially in the SME market, failing to get technology aligned correctly may prove to be fatal to business.”

Technology now plays an integral part in a business's success. With the competitive edge these days, efficiency is absolutely key, he says – and if people aren't willing to adapt their ways of working, they may not be the right people for your business.

## SORDID STORY

Many of the problems in IT stem from similar areas in different businesses – the story is not new. 95% of the reason this particular firm



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couldn't stay afloat is because of a failed approach to technology. It's as simple as that, says Roebuck.

“Two years ago I got involved with a firm from more of a human side as opposed to the IT side. I was friends with the person at the top.” We'll call them 'Anon'.

“Anon was being fishy about the market – money was tight and all of the usual stuff. The firm's IT system was inadequate and vastly underutilised compared to what a lot of other firms were doing.”

Anon decided to go off into the marketplace to buy a new system. Roebuck says big mistake number one is the firm didn't approach or take enough interest in the transition between old and new systems as it should have.

Anon therefore didn't put the backing and support around the project that was needed – the only person who was put on the job later turned around and left the firm. This situation was then worsened owing to lack of buy-in and understanding from the firm at the outset.

And on top of this, there was a set of circumstances around the business at that moment in time and things were a little bit tight as this firm was doing a lot of legal aid work, Roebuck says.

“The transition to the live system didn't really go as it should have done. Training was inadequate and Anon pushed staff into new behaviours.”

Unsurprisingly, there was push back from the firm. Roebuck says big mistake number two was an ingrained cultural problem. Staff wanted to do it their way, because they knew best – this made the technology implementation very difficult.

The firm never really got up to speed over the next two years and so, to this day, Anon got themselves into a state where the housekeeping is still very manual, he adds.

“It's 2018 and I see it all too often. Firms are doing things by hand when they really don't need to,” he says.

There' are about 3,000 paper files kicking around the place – Anon couldn't, even now, print a list off a system that showed them the caseload, Roebuck says. But what's worse is that these 3,000 cases reported live on the previous system and half of them had outstanding working progress on unpaid disbursements – but only about 700 of these case were actually live.

“Administratively speaking, Anon had a huge exercise to undertake to deal with all of that. He ended up writing off X, Y, Z amount of work in progress – which was obviously affecting his bottom line. In reality that WIP, with over two-thirds of its caseload, was actually fiction. If Anon didn't know that, they didn't want to know and if they did know, they didn't want to.”

It seems that everything that could go wrong, did. But actually, Roebuck says, this isn't as uncommon for firms in the SME market as one might hope.

## BAD FORM

Quite often, firms end up having a few bits and pieces of old systems, acquired either through mergers or hapless buying, and bringing it all on leads to a mismatched and incomprehensible setup – it's important to stop and think things through.

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Firms spend huge amounts of money to put in the right technology but then fail to use it correctly. Roebuck says many SME firms are still choosing to make use of site-based hardware – servers which often sit unprotected in a corner under the filing cabinet.

But it's counterintuitive, he says. "Why would you go and spend a quarter of a million quid, or the lion's share thereof, to rebuild your internal network and update your software when the cloud is right in front of you?"

"You can move on a fixed fee if you like, X per seat per month and you can factor that into your budget and move on with work."

To go back to the 'sordid story' firm, Roebuck says it's in a situation where over the last 24 months, hardware has essentially ground to a halt, and Anon's got £120,000 worth of software with a platform that isn't capable of running it.

"Cloud is the way forward. It's one of the reasons why I started Accesspoint. And with the fundamental shift taking place in legal aid right now, how is a firm like the example I've given ever going to afford to maintain these levels of investment in software upgrades, whether on the latest versions of Office or anything else over the

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next decade? It seems impossible to me. Cloud isn't a buzzword – it's a business life-saver."

SME firms are up against much larger organisations that can build their own infrastructure if they want to – cloud enables SME firms to access the same capabilities. So, Roebuck says, he finds it difficult to understand why any SME firm would contemplate going out and buying new hardware – yet they do, day in day out.

“It’s old-school thinking. And this is more likely to happen when you have lawyers running the show. They’re not business people, as much as they might like to think they are – they won’t approach this from a business angle. And they’re not IT people – they’re a little scared of it.”

He says there’s a philosophy that whatever the firm buys, it’s an asset, it’s going to sit there and it’s on the balance sheet – but, it’s also depreciating over the years; £100,000 worth of hardware today is worth zero in two years.

We’re seeing that in the market right now, he adds – everything is end of life. And many SME law firms don’t have in-house IT teams, so they’re really chasing their tails when they invest in hardware. “But of course, I would sell cloud because I’m the cloud man. Unfortunately I feel like that’s what many decision-makers are thinking when they talk to me,” he says.

Accesspoint puts hundreds of thousands of pounds into its new hardware – it forms a significant part of the budget, Roebuck says. Accesspoint does this so its clients are always on the most up-to-date systems available. An SME firm can’t afford to do that regularly.

“Cloud is a utility; rent it and move on,” he says.

## WHAT POINT?

It’s hard to buy a bad practice management system (PMS) these days, says Roebuck. Implementing a PMS correctly and having the right culture for change means that firms won’t turn out like the firm in his example.

“The majority of SME firms, without a doubt, use less than 70% of the available functionality in the PMS,” he says.

So, how should firms go about having a strategy around their IT? Roebuck says have a dot on your horizon.

“If you consider the horizon and you’re looking at it, you’re just looking. Now if you put a dot on the horizon, you can walk towards it. It doesn’t matter if you move the dot to the left or to the right, that’s your technology shift and other changes in the market. All that matters is that you have something you can aim for – and that comes from developing the right strategy.”

Consider what the implementation plan looks like now, roadmap it, know how it fits into the collective business strategy over the next year to two years, he says.

**“Failure to get to grips with your IT systems and platforms can see you going out of business. It’s a harsh reality but that’s the sort of environment we work in now.”**



Roebuck says start by finding the right IT partner – don’t just go out and buy. It’s got to be someone you believe in and who knows the market and will share your vision with you. Next, understand that you need to put the right underlying infrastructure in place – future-proof yourself, get your cost model right and understand what your fixed underlying IT costs are, and take it toward the cloud.

“Once you have your environment sorted, along with all of the peripherals like email, then you can move to PMS. What do you want it to do, and what does the growth trajectory look like for the business?”

There’s a lot of ongoing commitment required to continually develop the software applications and processes, Roebuck says. It’s neverending.

Firms will get the most value out of their software not hardware; the rest of it is investment of time and money in developing it to run your business for you, he says.

“Failure to get to grips with your IT systems and platforms can see you going out of business. It’s a harsh reality but that’s the sort of environment we work in now.” Firms must continually develop, invest and use them to the fullest, he says – because if you’re not doing it, your competitors are. **LPM**

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