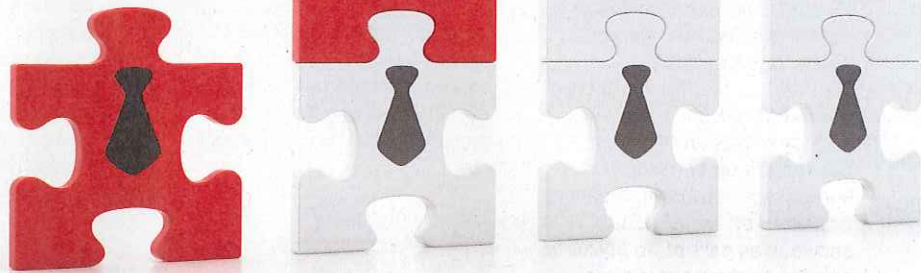


Neil Hodge looks at the products and services available to support law firms as an open market in legal services comes closer

Support acts



The advent of alternative business structures and the opening up of the legal services market to non-traditional providers was always meant to be a way of improving customer choice by making the sector more competitive.

But while many firms relish the challenge of a more vibrant market, others are worried that the increase in competition will force them to cut costs to stay attractive – or that they will need to invest heavily in the latest technology to run more efficiently, as well as buy in professional services such as marketing and PR to increase their profile. And the prospect of spending more to charge less is unappealing.

But this does not need to be the case. While IT providers, PR firms, and back-office outsourcing specialists have all pitched their services to the legal profession in the run up to ABSs, many products and services are priced so that even two-partner firms can afford them – if the firm feels they will be useful.

Computing success

Legal IT packages are a case in point. DirectLaw from legal software developer **Epoq** allows law firms to compete with new entrants by providing them with the same online service delivery capability as used by many non-traditional providers, such as banks and insurers. The software offers a series of templates that allow

clients to complete questionnaires online with a solicitor to create a detailed first draft of a document or form. This reduces the client's costs and slashes the time a solicitor has to spend on paperwork. Firms already using it include Russell Jones & Walker, Kester Cunningham John, Stephenson's, and Warners Solicitors. Starting from £55 (plus VAT) per fee-earner per month, its cost is not off limits to small legal practices.

Solicitors Own Software's (SOS) Connect package is aimed predominantly at medium-sized firms and helps clients monitor and action the progress of their cases in real time. The software offers fully automated case management in areas such as conveyancing, probate and personal injury.

But one of Connect's main selling points is that it can also be used as an effective performance management tool to provide partners and practice managers with up-to-date, relevant insight into key performance indicators such as time recorded, fees billed, realisations and debtor days.

Nottingham-based practice Rothera Dowson is streamlining business processes by introducing SOS Connect to around 100 users for integrated practice, accounting and matter management. And the business is already feeling the benefits. 'Time leakage' has reduced due to fully automated time recording, especially as fee-earners are prompted to record time spent on incoming and outgoing emails. The firm's commercial department has

welcomed the software's close integration with Microsoft Outlook for recording email 'conversations' and simplifying its retrieval and archiving. Each fee-earner is also kept closely in tune with business performance through the use of key performance indicators and on-screen status reports which help them track progress against budgeted performance. The introduction of sequential and auto-billing has also removed this burden from fee-earners, thereby reducing the time they spend on this task, especially around month end.

'There is no doubt that the changes to the legal landscape partly drove our decision to upgrade our systems,' says Richard Hammond, Rothera Dowson's IT partner. 'However, we expect the positive impact of SOS Connect to give us the opportunity to improve our levels of customer service and our operational effectiveness.'

Return on investment

There are several other software packages that have practical applications for lawyers. For example, Workshare Professional allows legal professionals to manage and compare changes to word documents and PDFs, as well as clean documents from hidden metadata. It also enables users to summarise the changes by category, alert them on receipt of a changed document and automatically run comparisons directly from Microsoft Outlook. In tests this can reduce the effort to

run a comparison from 14 clicks to just two.

Baker & McKenzie uses the software as a way to streamline the process of creating and reviewing legal documents and contracts. It has estimated that the software has saved it thousands of hours resulting in a 663% return on investment (ROI). The firm's secretarial and paralegal staff save half an hour a day through better collaboration with document reviewers, reduced review cycles and a faster document production process. The IT staff save about one hour a week that was previously spent rectifying document problems.

Some firms are using software packages to determine customer satisfaction and enable greater client feedback. Pinsent Masons, for example, decided to implement QuestBack's online feedback management software to broaden the scope of its in-house survey capabilities and enable it to quickly and easily survey its clients on relevant issues. Alex Pope, the firm's research manager, says that 'we can now rely on QuestBack's online research tool to assist the research team in producing thought leadership reports on key trends in different sectors and providing partners and practitioners with client satisfaction reports'.

Pope adds that the firm has notably increased the response-rate from all its outreach campaigns since using the software. Surveys are now quick to set up and can be easily tailored to

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