

# Briefing

INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

DECEMBER 2015

*Feature*

## Info on the edge

How are law firms putting the data deluge in closer proximity to the fingertips?

*Industry views*

## System thinking

Supplier thoughts on securing the IT to thrive in the professional future

## Time travel

*Karen Jacks, IT director at Bird & Bird, on the productivity gains of investment in a more intuitive user journey*



*Briefing Industry Analysis*

# Teamwork on trial

**Kim Walton at Enable asks why document collaboration has lagged behind in the race to innovate**

**It's not easy to find an article about legal IT that doesn't mention innovation and efficiency.**

But in spite of the speed of technology change and advances in devices and access to information, there has been one area of legal IT that has seen little change in 20 years. That's the process for collaborating on transactional documents, where documents are typed using Microsoft Word and then distributed to external parties by email.

Email was the biggest game changer in the document production process since the word processor. It was quick and easy to use. But it also introduced a number of challenges. There was an increase in document corruption – and additional products were implemented to combat this, as well as for document

comparison and stripping metadata. At the same time, internal processes such as firm-wide house style and bespoke macros increased efficiency when working on internal documents, but they introduced more issues when working on other firms' documents.

## Tools for trade

So what changes have taken place with the advent of document collaboration?

The most notable is the increase in the number of lawyers amending documents. The handyman challenge on TV's *The Apprentice* highlighted that, given the right tools, simple tasks can be completed with little



training. However, they often take longer, proving more difficult than expected. Sometimes a professional is needed to do the job properly (although in any group there is fortunately a small percentage who know how to use the tools, and to use them well).

There have been several attempts to innovate in legal technology. In 2000, there was the battle of the extranets. Clifford Chance and Allen & Overy competed to provide the first law firm offering. In theory, extranets should have been a game changer for document collaboration. But although they've been extremely successful at changing the way we operate data rooms, they've achieved limited success with document collaboration. Why? Perhaps because an extranet just isn't as quick and easy as email – particularly if you don't control it.

Areas where technology has successfully changed process include document automation and digital dictation. Document automation will become much more prevalent, helped by changes in fee arrangements. And as voice technology advances, and we become used to talking to internet-enabled gadgets, digital dictation may be overtaken by its speech recognition cousin.

## The innovation equation

Another major initiative gaining traction is the UKDEG standard styles scheme. It's a standard to make it easier for organisations to work on their own and others' documents, and LexisNexis was the first publisher to adopt it.

But why has document collaboration lacked the innovation enjoyed in other areas?

Innovative products and others designed to increase efficiency need certain attributes. They solve a problem. They are easier to use than existing methods. And they are quicker to use than existing methods. Adoption needs a simple and attractive user experience.

There also needs to be both recognition of a problem and a willingness to change. But even with that desire, the prevalence of third party products integrated with Microsoft Office and the legacy of huge numbers are barriers to change. This is evidenced by the large number of firms using a version of Microsoft Office at least one or even two versions behind the latest.

Let's face it. If you're looking to invest, legal

document production is uninspiring compared to web apps, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, big data, mobility, and indeed whatever the next big idea may be.

So will law firms still be typing documents in Microsoft Word and distributing via email in another 15 years? Will they have the same third-party tools for document comparison, fixing issues and removing metadata? In 2027, will they have just upgraded to Office 2024, and then relax in the knowledge that the next upgrade is five years away?

Let's hope not.

A potential game changer is collaboration on documents in real time. Office 365 enables multiple users to work on a document at the same time. With Word 2016, Microsoft provides this in real time on the desktop as well as in the cloud. SharePoint and OneDrive provide collaboration spaces to share the latest version of the document with permitted users. Versioning can record every change to the document, as well as who made it. Imagine collaborating on documents without email distribution. Imagine the timesavings when you don't need to wait until someone else has finished their edits before doing yours. Imagine fixing document-formatting issues while other edits are being made. Confusing? Possibly – but no more so than trying to coordinate and incorporate riders, comments and different document amendments sent by email.

True collaboration is possible today. The question is, are firms going to embrace these technologies? In the short term, unlikely. Making this new innovative technology work seamlessly with other applications, such as document management systems, still seems to be prohibitive. The key is to invest in innovative companies that are willing and able to grow with their products; to create better products that provide solutions to ever-changing needs.

It's clear that collaborating in this way with clients – and other lawyers – in an increasingly mobile and global world could bring efficiency. But firms must be willing to invest in smarter technologies to make business process better.

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