7 IT insights for highly-ambitious law firms

doherty associates

Technology has the potential to reshape the legal sector. It can open firms up to new opportunities, encourage collaboration, help to nurture relationships, assist with partner remuneration and help to close cases at a faster rate. And that's just the beginning.

Despite three-quarters of law firms agreeing that innovating with technology can open doors within the legal sector, more than half would rather wait for another firm to take the leap first.

While these firms decide to hedge their bets and hang back, they're leaving the goal wide open for ambitious firms that are willing to make a strategic bet on new technology and – if they succeed – reap all the rewards. In such a competitive industry, this kind of head start is not one to overlook.

If you want to get ahead of the competition, here are seven IT habits of highly-effective law firms that you need to embrace, and fast.

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1. They think digital

The first – and arguably most important – IT insight is to accept technology into the firm and embrace it. For example, taking written notes at a client meeting is a difficult habit for any lawyer to break, but it's one that needs to go if the firm is serious about moving forward and embracing innovation.

While pen and paper has an archaic charm and it avoids the need to put a laptop screen between the lawyer and her client, it is all too easy for written notes to get lost or damaged. Now that there are so many secure and efficient digital alternatives, such as Microsoft OneNote, any lawyer that insists on handwritten notes is clinging to a dying, outdated tradition.

2. They're open to the cloud

On a related note, boxes of case files are not an unfamiliar sight in any law office, and while it might once have been the most practical way to store client information nearby, it is no longer efficient or secure. Some forward-looking firms may have progressed to on-site servers to store their data, but even this is not ideal.

Beyond the very real possibility of misplacing paper documents or accidental deletion, there is also the risk of losing years' worth of data if the office floods or worse. That is why the most effective firms are looking to the cloud. They scan, store and share (selectively and securely) their documents online with collaborative document management tools like SharePoint.

Whether you choose public, private or hybrid, the cloud gives laws firms the freedom to store their data securely off site without running the risk of a breach or disaster.

3. They stay up to date

Technology isn't a one-off purchase. Once you invest in a piece of software or a line-of-business application you need to ensure you always have the most recent version available. There are two reasons for this: efficiency and security.

To be an efficient firm, you need the latest versions of your software and applications to make sure that your employees have access to new and emerging features so they can be as productive as possible. But more importantly, keeping your software up to date will guarantee that you are protected against bugs and breach points in older, unsupported versions of the application.

4. They use technology to collaborate

Lawyers are known for their independent and sometimes competitive nature. When a single deal can sway their chances of making partner, it's no surprise lawyers sometimes prefer to work alone. A successful law firm, however, is built on collaboration. Lawyers can do great work alone but as a team they can go even further.

Collaboration can be difficult, especially if your firm spans multiple offices, which is why technology is the perfect enabler. With the right tools, such as Microsoft Office 365, senior partners can break down the silos within their firm and get their associates working together effectively.

5. They're equipped for working on the go

When time is money, the hours can be long, and they're not all spent

at the office. Whether they're working from home or making the most of a commute, lawyers need to have access to line-of-business applications and all their files when they're outside the firm.

Mobile or remote working can be a difficult challenge to overcome for any business, but even more so for an industry that relies so much on data security, trust and confidentiality. Working on the go is efficient but it must be safe, too, and the most effective law firms are actively trying to find that balance by leveraging the right technology and working practices.

6. They have backups and disaster recovery measures in place

No matter what industry you're in, your business is never immune to disaster. It might be accidental human error, malicious intent, a server outage or a fire in the building but the end result is the same: lost data. In the legal sector, reputation counts for a lot and one disaster can spell the end of even a long-standing client relationship.

That is why the best law firms have strong, secure back up and disaster recovery measures in place. Having an off-site back up of all your files and a structured procedure for getting the business back to normal after a serious data loss can save not only hours of costly downtime, but also the trust and reputation of a firm.

7. They leave the IT to the experts

Ensuring that your firm has good IT habits is almost a full-time job in itself. Researching the best applications for more productive work, making sure that your firm's software is up to date and implementing a sound remote-working policy takes knowledge, experience and time to get right.

It is just not possible for even the best law firm to manage all of this, on top of nurturing client relationships, preparing for partner remuneration and ensuring the smooth running of the firm. To be a highly-effective law firm that uses technology as an enabler, you need to bring in the experts to manage what you and your colleagues don't have the time for.

Taking your firm to the next level

The impact of technology in the legal sector is seen as a cause for concern by 98 percent of managing partners and senior partners polled for the Law Firm Leader survey. Despite the fears, and although it is an industry known for tradition and tried-and-tested processes, more UK law firms are having to embrace technology to keep up with modern working practices and ever-increasing competition.

The law firm Linklaters, which made it on to the Financial Time's Top 50 in 2016, has already begun to change its long-standing culture to promote efficiency and innovation. 'The work is less about using big armies of lawyers and more about taking advantage of legal technologies and other innovations to be more efficient,' explains Laurence Muscat, head of business development at the firm.

The time for change has come in the legal industry and there are already a number of law firms leading the way. The question you have to ask yourself is this: are you ready to take your firm to the next level?

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