

RE-ENGINEERING THE LAW FIRM WITH AN INTEGRATED IT SOLUTION

There is an argument that the only way a large solicitors practice can reinvent itself today as a more commercially oriented legal business is to invest heavily in best of breed technology, bespoke workflow management systems, a large in-house software development team and an army of external consultants. Alternatively, they could follow the example of Liverpool based Silverbeck Rymer, who have transformed their operations over the past three years using a technology platform based on an integrated case and practice management system supplied by TFB plc (otherwise known as Technology for Business). Award winning legal IT journalist and industry commentator Charles Christian recently spoke to the firm's IT director Jan Frickel to find out how they achieved this transformation...

Until the late 1990s, Silverbeck Rymer was a mid-sized provincial firm with a substantial insurance panel practice. But, unlike many of their competitors, the partnership had the foresight to recognise that the changes taking place in the way the insurance industry was processing claims would have an impact on lawyers and that traditional panel firms had no future unless they too were prepared to change the way they operated. For the partners, the key to survival was to transform the firm from a solicitors practice into a business selling and delivering services – and if that meant investing in IT and creating a call centre environment – then they would do it.

For the partners, the key to survival was to transform the firm from a solicitors practice into a business selling and delivering services...

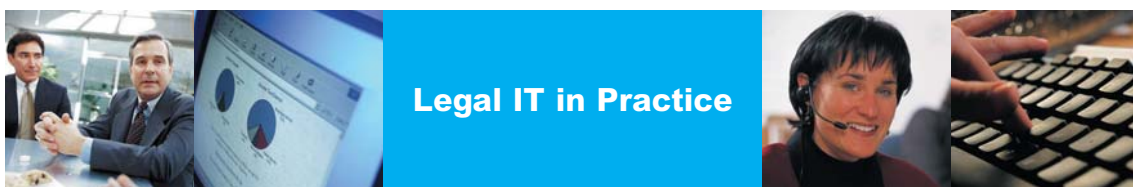
The starting point came in 1999 when the firm replaced its old accounts and case management software with the Y2K-compliant Partner for Windows (P4W) integrated case and practice management system from TFB plc. At the same

time, Jan Frickel was recruited to head up the firm's IT operations and to begin putting in place the systems that would support the re-engineering of the firm's business processes. But why the choice of an integrated system?

Integrated system “a no-brainer”

Frickel admits that although the decision to go with the supplier of an integrated solution more usually associated with firms outside of the top 100 (Silverbeck Rymer became and currently remains one of TFB's largest sites in terms of users) may have seemed risky, particularly at a time when the prevailing wisdom was that larger firms should only opt for best of breed systems, Frickel says the choice of TFB was “a no-brainer”.

“Of course we looked at all the options, including best of breed, but the alternatives were either hideously expensive or too basic,” says Frickel. “The way we wanted to develop the business was to create a call centre environment, supporting a wide range of case work types, into which data could be rapidly





captured and transferred to any fee earner within the firm but without requiring laborious manual processes or large numbers of support staff. It was a requirement that leant itself very easily to a modern integrated practice management, case management and fee earner desktop implementation based around one central core database (Microsoft SQL Server in the case of P4W), and this is the solution TFB were able to offer.”

Over the next couple of years, Frickel’s

“Of course we looked at all the options, including best of breed, but the alternatives were either hideously expensive or too basic.”

team focused upon transferring data from their legacy systems and rolling out the new TFB software while simultaneously developing their own ‘rule based scripting’ routines – known as ‘the Matrix’ – to manage all the business processes associated with the various types of work the system would help them handle.

The result was the launch in January 2002 of a ‘Contact Centre’ supporting operations in the firm’s Manchester, Chelmsford and two Liverpool offices. In effect this is a ‘first response unit’ that handles calls when they first come into the system (depending upon the work type, the calls may come in from introducers or direct from the client) and allows new matters to be opened. Previously this was almost entirely dependent upon the processing of paper files and was, in the words of Frickel “long winded and inaccurate”. With the new system however files are set up, schedules are created and work is prioritised automatically, with the scripting logic channelling the data into the case management system.

Efficiency improvements up to 82%

“This,” says Frickel, “has created one of the biggest changes in efficiency, reduc-

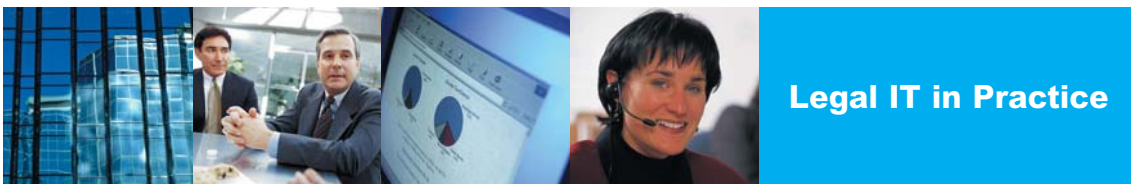
ing the time it takes to set up a new matter and begin work on it from 12 to 14 minutes, to under 2.5 minutes” – an important saving given the volume of new instructions being received each day. It is also interesting to note that the case type is set by the business logic that has been built into the system and then channelled by the case management software to the relevant fee earners, rather than depending upon the answers given by introducers or lay clients who cannot be expected at the time of making the call to know what sort of legal process may be relevant.

Designing new business processes

Once the system was initially proven, up and running, as well as developing fresh scripts to support new work types – over 80 different case types can already be handled – Silverbeck Rymer has also been able to adopt a far more proactive role in its dealings with insurance companies and introducers. “Instead of being invited to tender and being told how we are to process the work, we are now designing new business processes and asking our commercial clients whether they have ever considered handling their work in new and more efficient ways,” says Frickel.

“[P4W] has created one of the biggest changes in efficiency, reducing the time it takes to set up a new matter and begin work on it from 12 to 14 minutes, to under 2.5 minutes.”

One area where this is already happening is in transactions with ‘key suppliers’, such as medical agencies and hire car services that policyholders may have contact with in the course of a claim. Instead of dealing with them all directly on a one-to-one basis, the client’s first call to Silverbeck Rymer’s Contact Centre ensures that they too are automatically contacted and brought into the picture.





Or, as Frickel puts it, “Some of our work is purely legal, while other aspects – such as providing car hire services for people involved in road traffic accidents – is more of a business service. That is the point; we are lawyers but we can also do the other stuff for you. It has given us a competitive edge.”

Better results at a lower cost

Although still a relatively new development, Frickel is confident that by the end of 2003, over 75 percent of all instructions and financial transactions with key suppliers will be handled automatically by direct system-to-system EDI (electronic data interchange) links – again all based around the core TFB system. As Frickel points out: “We cannot keep to the SLAs (service level agreements) with our own clients if our suppliers have fluffy systems.” For this reason, Silverbeck Rymer has also not invested heavily in extranets offering clients direct access to matter progress and financial reporting information because they “don’t think they will be around in 12 months.” Frickel believes EDI is a far more effective way of delivering information for reporting and analysis purposes.

This championship of EDI has already yielded benefits within the firm. For example, before the introduction of EDI, the firm used to have two people working full time just posting financial transactions on to the accounts from claimant medical agencies. Now it is handled automatically. The firm also used to have one person whose job involved compiling performance statistics – now they are generated automatically within 25 minutes. And, these are just two examples of the introduction of the new IT systems leading to

an improvement in fee earner to secretarial support staff ratios. Among the teams handling personal injury work, the ratio is 9 to 1 – in other words, for every nine fee earners there is only one secretary. In the small claims department, the ratio is even more astounding with 35 fee earners and no support staff whatsoever.

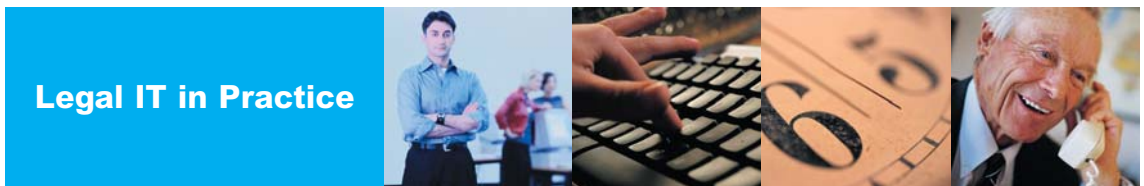
Furthermore, although Silverbeck Rymer is not solely a panel firm – in addition to the type of high volume work that readily lends itself to automation, there are other more conventional, people intensive areas of practice, such as medical negligence – even taking into account their requirements, the overall fee to earner to

Among the teams handling personal injury work, the ratio is 9 to 1 – in other words, for every nine fee earners there is only one secretary. In the small claims department, the ratio is even more astounding with 35 fee earners and no support staff whatsoever.

support staff ratio still only falls to 5 to 1, which is about double the level of efficiency enjoyed by most firms. However, as Frickel points out, even in the least automated parts of the business where

there is no computerised case management, the IT systems are still widely used for practice and data management purposes with, for example, fee earners processing their own bills.

It is also worth noting that despite its size – there are now 300 users of the TFB system at Silverbeck Rymer – the firm has only one IT trainer, a direct result of the decision to standardise on the TFB software so everyone has the same process driven client-centric user interface on their desktop – rather than the range of separate systems they would get with a best of breed solution. One by-product of this decision is the fact that it now takes an average of 30 minutes to train new staff to use the system, whereas previously it took two days to train staff to use the old case management system.



Legal IT in Practice



The secrets of success

Frickel attributes Silverbeck Rymer's successful IT implementation to a combination of factors. These include having the wholehearted, proactive support of the partners – both in terms of financial resources and management commitment to the business re-engineering process.

To focusing on the projects that can deliver the big wins first – so as to generate enthusiasm for the project. And the decision by the firm to build each case type from scratch – rather than try to get fee earners to adapt the way they worked to fit in with the constraints of off-the-shelf case management packages.

Frickel says the latter approach always generates resistance whereas

the Silverbeck Rymer strategy has seen all the development of case management driven by the fee earners and the demands of the business, with the result that “instead of complaining about IT, they are driving it.”

Impressive results

Three years on, Silverbeck Rymer is shooting up the top 100 of the UK's largest law firms. Nearly 300 users, located in four office locations, access the computer network on a regular basis. The Contact Centre is dealing with as

Despite this volume of work, in three years there have been no server failures and only 10 minutes of network downtime in the past six months...all achieved by an IT team which, including developers, support staff, administration and security specialists, comprises just 10 people, plus Frickel, and is based upon an integrated system that is still perceived by many lawyers and IT specialists as suitable only for practices outside the top 100.

many as 2,000 calls a day relating to 80 different case types on an '8 'til 8' basis five days a week (and until noon on Saturdays). In terms of fixed fee, small claims work alone, the firm is handling in excess of 20,000 claims a year. And, on the non-contentious side, from a standing start, within the space of eight months

Silverbeck Rymer has built up a conveyancing practice now with a capacity of over 600 completions a month.

Despite this volume of work, in three years there have been no server failures and only 10 minutes of network downtime in the past six months. Furthermore, it has all been achieved by an IT team which, including developers, support staff, administration and security specialists, comprises

just 10 people, plus Frickel, and is based upon an integrated system that is still perceived by many lawyers and IT specialists as suitable only for practices outside the top 100.

Frickel says the decision to go with TFB was “a no-brainer” but this message – that standard software rolled out and used imaginatively can deliver all the benefits of bespoke, best of breed implementations but without the “hideous expense” – is clearly one that many firms have still to appreciate. ■

**Charles Christian
Publisher & Editor**

**Tel: 01379 687518 Fax: 01379 687704
Email: news@legaltechnology.com**



LEGAL TECHNOLOGY INSIDER www.legaltechnology.com

**For further information about TFB's solutions and services, please contact:
Sales Department TFB plc, 1-2 Kingdom Close, Kingdom Business Park,
Segensworth East, Fareham, Hampshire PO15 5TJ
Tel: 01489 609010 Fax: 01489 609999 enquiries@tfbplc.co.uk www.tfbplc.co.uk**

