

HOW BUSINESS COMMUNICATES EFFECTIVELY

Interview with
PETER TAYLOR
MANAGING PARTNER
PARIS SMITH



In a series of interviews with Andrew Skipsey, managing director of M12 Solutions, directors and partners at professional practices consider the issues.

The interviews will be brought together as a report to be published by DECISION magazine and then as a digital book.

BECAUSE OF THE speed of modern communications, business will need to prioritise better management of customer expectations, observes Peter Taylor, managing partner of law firm Paris Smith, who nostalgically remembers the telex machine when he first trained.

He points out that when somebody sends an email, the subject matter is by definition at the forefront of their mind. "Their emotional response is therefore to think that they will get a reply straight away," he suggests. "But logically, the chances are it isn't the only matter that the recipient is dealing with, who in any case could be in a meeting or in the car. But the longer the delay in receiving a response of acknowledgement, the more danger that the sender will become frustrated and think they have been forgotten."

That means firms have to manage expectations about how quickly they will respond, says Taylor. "Sometimes it is sufficient to reply to a client 'I will read this and I will come back to you by such and such a date' or to say you will schedule a telephone call. But that acknowledgement of receipt should be made and it has to be done pro-actively."

He cites a good practice example of how to manage customer expectations. "I went to a website the other day to buy tickets for the Six Nations rugby and I

was told I was in a queue, but they asked me to be patient and had a clock that showed how near I was to the top of the queue. That managed my expectations well."

His point is that technology has the potential to improve customer service, but only if we think about how it can be brought about. In other words, it won't just happen. "Every touch point should be a positive one and technology can help with that," Taylor maintains. "It not only deals with questions around communication when you're not at your desk, but has to be consistent with the firm's sense of purpose and values, which in our case include being service led and people focused."

Then there's the issue of efficiency, and Taylor predicts that professional practices will continue to have to invest huge amounts in technology. "In every sector of the economy there is a challenge to enhance productivity," muses Taylor. "Some advisers might take the view that it applies to them as well. I think it does. Why would a client want to pay for a human being to do a task when a machine can do it at a fraction of the cost and as efficiently or more so? Technology can help us take away some of the administrative burden. It can do things like read documents, search for keywords, compare and contrast the contents. Technology will

make the conveyancing process faster, partly through offering better links to the Land Registry and lenders. There are developments which can predict the outcomes of legal cases, based on a database of previous cases – and the proposals to put more of the court system online will shake things up a bit.”

The firm is currently looking at hosted cloud solutions. “The server takes up a lot of space and there is the prospect that moving to the cloud would reduce space and cost as well as help us manage the risk given the volume of data that we have,” says Taylor.

He is also interested in developments like client portals; telephone systems that identify the caller and the city they are calling from, and route them to the appropriate person; voice recognition systems that can translate accurately direct from meeting to text; and kit that can record telephone conversations when advice is being given, to ensure there’s a verbatim record in the event of disputes over what was said.

Taylor thinks technology is no longer something which is implemented to reduce head count. “It should be about enabling you to do more with the same number of people, because it gives you the ability to be more versatile and agile.” For example, diverting calls to mobiles

means that people can be contactable as if they are in the office. Technology will reduce the amount of paper and that will create more space so that it will be easier to bring in more people. The key is to make sure that work is rewarding and challenging; if you can take away the routine and mundane, staff will feel more engaged and satisfied and that will enable us to attract more talent.”

Not least, there will always be people needed to answer the phones. Taylor’s take on this is that law firms should employ “someone who responds in a professional but friendly manner and takes ownership of the call, knowing that they are representing the organisation. “They recognise that you called because you need assistance and they deliver a positive experience,” he asserts.

Neither should the new efficiencies made possible by IT be allowed to erode a firm’s values, he goes on. “We stay true to doing the right thing even when no one is watching,” he explains.

“Working with people with shared values give you a bedrock that is really rewarding both for clients and lawyers and that also serves to minimise risk. So we are not shy about walking away from trying to establish a relationship with people who don’t share our values.”

So Taylor doesn't see IT ever replacing the firm's fundamental focus on service, or as he puts it, "using our legal skills to address what's keeping our clients awake at night."

But one of issues still for law firms is a lack of understanding of IT, he suggests. "Lawyers are trained to be lawyers and technology providers could be better at sharing with key decision-makers what's out there, and how IT could improve efficiencies, the client experience and the employee experience. There could be a host of information in their heads which would benefit Paris Smith and strengthen the business, but the problem is that IT people can assume that other people have their level of knowledge and understanding or are on the same wavelength."

Another interesting development Taylor identifies is how technology has caused a shift in the traditional hierarchy within and between firms. "Historically, people at the top communicated with each other and middle management communicated with each other and so on, but technology has now enabled lines of communication to be very different," he says. "For example, junior staff at Company A can connect with the managing director of company B, and oldies like me are trying to make sense of all that."

Perhaps the issue that comes up most often when talking to any law firm about IT is cyber crime. Taylor says that Paris Smith have tested their resilience to human error in this context by hiring an external agency to contact members of staff pretending to be the bank or IT provider. "We wanted to see how they responded, whether the lawyer concerned would give access to the computers. I am pleased to say we were as robust as we could be."

More worrying is the potential for emails to and from clients to be hacked, as Taylor explains: "I understand that software can highlight certain keywords in emails or identifies when bank details are mentioned and then the fraudulent individuals intercept the email just before the money changes hands. So we don't accept any bank details by email; we need a hard copy letter and we will follow that up with a verbal communication involving pre-arranged security questions, a bit like when you speak to the bank."

Taylor's fantasy technology? "Something that could make me redundant!" And in that context he draws a sporting analogy. "I read a book about the All Blacks rugby team, in which they talk about their pride in wearing the shirt. The shirt is treated with respect; it is never allowed to touch the floor and then it is handed over in

really good condition. Lessons from that are very relevant to businesses. I see my role as being a custodian and trustee who then hands over the baton of leadership to the next person, in a better state than when I took over, better able to take on the challenges, including that of engaging with millennials. And if the means to that is using new technology, I want to know about it."



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