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DISCUSSION SUMMARY

**LEGAL SESSION:
HOW TO COPE WITH
REMOTE WORKING
IN TURBULENT
TIMES**

This article was written by Roger Camrass, director of CIONET UK and a visiting professor of the University of Surrey, and is based on the conversations during a virtual lunch session 'How to cope with remote working in turbulent times' sponsored by BlackBerry in May, 2020.

When remote working suddenly become a necessity

The COVID-19 pandemic caught us all by surprise as we entered 2020. But in many respects CIOs were ahead of the curve with their adoption of modern technology infrastructures and collaborative tools. For many law firms the rapid move to home working occurred as a relatively smooth transition despite a few days of panic. Delegates were at different stages of infrastructural renewal, but all appeared to cope well with the sudden transition:

- Confidence amongst legal partnerships in IT has grown since the pandemic as the transition to home working was relatively uneventful. This presents opportunities for CIOs to request further funds for IT investments
- The move to MS 365 has helped distributed working given its reliance on public cloud through the Azure platform. However, variations in broadband across the UK have put some home workers at a disadvantage.
- Printing costs have decreased dramatically with few home workers demanding access to central facilities. This presents a genuine opportunity to eliminate all printing and thus contribute to the environmental agenda. It does require electronic editing facilities

What are the current gaps in distributed working?

The move to distributed working has posed relatively few technical issues but has surfaced problems in areas such as work-life balance and not being able to execute legal processes through the courts. The absence of juries has curtailed many criminal trials.

The current routine of constant Zoom calls leaves little time for social banter or informal knowledge exchange. This could have negative effects on close knit partnerships. Productivity remains a concern as it is more difficult to track home workers.

Where will we be post pandemic?

COVID-19 has exposed weaknesses in the practice of law, as well as offering genuine opportunities for the future. Here are some observations and predictions made by delegates:

1. where will we work in the future?

It is unlikely that lawyers will continue to work full time from home post the pandemic. However, many recognise the value of partial home working – avoiding the long commutes into major cities. There is the prospect of creating distributed hubs or satellite offices (such as Hoxton's co-worker hub) where lawyers can meet clients (what we call 'heads-up) and work in teams (Heads together). 'Heads down' activities such as emails and contract writing can be easily done at home. Some delegates pointed to a 50:50 split. This will have profound consequences for current centre city office space and support costs.

Advances in personal authentication using artificial intelligence will overcome problems of home working. Software will be able to recognise individuals by their physical movements (a Blackberry capability). This will free up people to work as they want.

2. different ways of working

Technologies that enable collaboration at a distance are now maturing such as Slack, Teams, Google Hang Out, Zoom. These technologies can be applied to legal processes to enable different ways of working, encouraging closer collaboration with clients. Virtual client/legal teams can be spun up quickly and could reduce time to settle complex transactions.

Ways of creating and amending legal documents can also benefit from technologies such as voice recognition and electronic editing. Artificial intelligence and machine learning will automate much of the legal workload in the future giving professionals more time to focus on client relationships and problem solving. This could help reduce organisational hierarchies but may deprive juniors of learning experiences.

Overall technology can reduce friction in today's legal processes with the benefits of speed, quality and cost improvements. Many clients are demanding outcome-based fees rather than time and materials. Automation will make this more feasible and profitable.

3. emphasis on efficiency

The prospect of distributed working will accelerate the use of management information tools to track billings, cash collections and measure productivity. Data analytics will help inform partners as to ways of increasing productivity and eliminating friction in workflows. Automation will accelerate as robotic process automation (RPA) gains traction.

3. residual issues to be dealt with

Security, business continuity and regulatory compliance are top of the agenda for the legal sector. The move to home working has highlighted several security concerns such as shadow IT – staff adopting public apps such as Dropbox instead of adhering to enterprise applications. The move to ‘bring your own everything’ such as choice of devices (Apple or Samsung phones) will compound these concerns unless carefully managed via secure platforms.

Conclusions and next steps

The shared belief around the table is the legal profession will not return to where it was in 2019. We can expect a mix of home, satellite and central office working beyond 2020. There will be far greater flexibility around devices as secure platforms offer safe work environments. The ability to personalise work to suit everyone will appeal to the up and coming millennial generation as they enter professional practice. Some next steps to be considered include:

- Security audit around home and distributed working – where are the weak links in current infrastructures and devices
- Review of automation opportunities – where is there wasted time and effort (friction) and how can this be eliminated using RPA and other tools
- Technologies that encourage closer collaboration with clients and enable law firms to offer greater transparency around inputs and outputs
- Scenario planning to consider seismic shifts in workforce, workflow and workplace in the 2025-2030 time frames



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