



HARNESSING IT

INTERVIEWS

Chris Setford Guy Setford

FOUNDER DIRECTOR



Setfords
SOLICITORS

Taylor Made
COMPUTER SOLUTIONS

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In a series of interviews with Taylor Made Computer Solutions, directors reveal what they perceive to be the issues if IT is to deliver key objectives.

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

HARNESSING IT

INTERVIEWS

AS A MODEL FOR a professional practice, Setfords Solicitors are somewhat unusual for a law firm in that all their lawyers are self-employed and most work remotely.

It has taken heavy investment in IT to ensure that the nationwide network of 170 lawyers can communicate easily and securely with the head office, where all the back-office functions are handled by a fifty-strong central team.

“The lawyers are freed up to deal with the lawyering while we deal with the red tape; they don’t see any of that back office activity,” says joint CEO Chris Setford. He explains that the lawyers generate their own work or take work that is handed to them from a central business development team. They can decide on their own charges, sharing a percentage of their fees depending on how much they earn.

When his cousin, Guy Setford, set up the firm in 2006, it operated traditionally but later moved to the remote working model, investing hundreds of thousands of pounds in technology to do so. That has led to double-digit growth every year.

The IT core of the business has always been its case management system. “That was the starting point,” says Guy. “We needed to be able to let our people see the central database and every document relating to the client from anywhere in the world.”

Another vital criterion was that head office would have sight of everything that comes into the firm and everything that goes out. This has meant that the supervision and compliance is “way beyond”

what would happen in a normal office, says Guy.

“A lawyer in a traditional firm would sign off his own post and it might not be seen by a partner. Here, everything that goes out is signed by a partner. Even experienced lawyers who have been doing the job for thirty years have their post looked at.”

All of the email traffic goes through the central office as well, with physical post scanned there and then uploaded to the case management system.

From the early days, Setfords decided they wanted their own servers located in a separate data centre rather than going to the cloud. “A lot of money went into making sure our system is quick and has enough storage,” says Guy. And that doesn’t come cheap, he says, commenting that a 1-TB computer costs £300 but the same amount of storage in a data centre costs £20,000.

Chris Setford takes up the theme:

“I like our data to be in the UK under supervision. If something were to go wrong we can’t pass the buck and say it’s not our fault, it happened at the server farm. It’s absolutely our responsibility.”

Cost is one advantage of this business model for the solicitors. The only thing they need to provide is a PC. There is VPN (virtual private network) for access to the ‘central store’; they all get a VOIP

HARNESSING IT

INTERVIEWS



(voice over internet protocol) phone with a local number but with calls routed seamlessly through the central hub.

While most lawyers use a digital dictation system which allows voice files to be sent elsewhere for transcription, not all like the voice recognition software which transcribes straight to text, except for file notes.

“With technology, a firm has to be led by what it needs,” says Guy Setford, making the point that there’s little point buying expensive software if it isn’t being sufficiently utilised.

“Most of our lawyers are at least five years post-qualification experienced and don’t have the same interest in IT as the millennials. Our approach is we would have to trial something first to see if it’s effective.”

As the lawyers mainly work from home, Setfords don’t have the overheads of having to have a building that could house nearly 200 people. And cost, as in reduction of, is an important part of the Setfords proposition. Chris Setford estimates that conveyancing fees, for example, can be as much as 40% less than from a conventional law firm.

“You could get cheaper still,” he admits, “but then you would be getting a non-lawyer. What we offer is bang in the middle between the traditional law firms

and the commodified firms that outsource a lot of the work to non-lawyers.

“Law is still very much about personal service. People still like the fact that there’s a qualified lawyer dealing with their case from start to finish. It’s a win-win scenario.”

But there’s the risk that a willingness to harness the latest IT can compromise the relationship with the client. Chris Setford cites the increasing popularity among law firms of client portals.

“We want to improve the client experience and drive efficiencies, but we need to recognise that a number of clients wouldn’t want to log in to a portal, so we have to maintain the lines of communication that they expect.”

“You have to be on guard not to alienate customers,” says Guy Setford. “People’s expectations of how they will receive a service are different. You could find that clients don’t like what you thought was a better way of doing things, and they’ll leave because they no longer enjoy the experience of working with you.”

And some IT – including portals – can be cost-prohibitive, adds Chris Setford. “If we want to roll something out to 200 lawyers, the licensing fees are considerable, and then there are other support costs.”

HARNESSING IT

INTERVIEWS

The main form of communication remains the telephone, with Skype not particularly popular among Setfords lawyers. “Bearing in mind a lot of our people work from home, very few sit there in a suit and tie,” suggests Chris Setford.

Another requirement of IT for law firms is the ability to scan large numbers of documents. “Human intervention will always be needed, because there is no such thing as truly accurate automated scanning,” suggests Guy Setford. “You would be amazed at the number of law firms that apply the wrong matter number to a document. Maybe some form of artificial intelligence could be used, but it doesn’t exist at the moment.”

Probably like every other law firm, Setfords have been the target of scammers pretending to be clients notifying changes of account details, so any changes of bank account details have to be notified by the client in writing.

“That’s one reason we still have a reliance on snail mail because it reduces the risk,” says Guy Setford. “It’s one of the things we still have to do in a traditional way. Fraud is very sophisticated, and when you make everything digital you create more exposure.”

The risk of fraud means being constantly vigilant. Chris Setford points out that successful scams rely on human error and that is minimised by the fact that all of Setfords’ back office functions are handled centrally.

“The lawyers have no control over the client funds. Centralising everything means that lawyers only have to be lawyers. We do absolutely everything else. IT makes the business model possible.”

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I N T E R V I E W S



Established in 1994, Taylor Made Computer Solutions are one of the largest and most highly-ranked IT service and support organisations in the south, currently employing over 110 staff.

Taylor Made are the first technology company in the region to have gained a third consecutive gold award from Investors in People. Taylor Made are also ISO 9001:2008 certified.

The company has been ranked in the top 10 managed service providers in Europe the Middle East and Africa (EMEA) in a leading annual industry survey from MSPmentor since 2012. Taylor Made are a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner, HP Preferred Partner and a NetApp Silver Partner.

Services include:

IT support, IT strategy, IT consultancy, hosted telephony, project management, Securo online back-up, hosted solutions, remote management and monitoring, cloud solutions, disaster recovery, remote access, outsource engineering, security, service desk support.

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