

Whyte Hirschboeck Dudek S.C. Achieves ‘Voice Productivity’ with BigHand Digital Dictation Software

By Alan Ciochon

For more than 60 years, Whyte Hirschboeck Dudek S.C. (WHD) has played a leading role in shaping the political, economic and legal landscapes in Wisconsin. The firm, with offices in Milwaukee, Madison, and Manitowoc, has more than 140 attorneys and paralegals practicing in more than 40 areas of law and is the only Wisconsin member of the American Law Firm Association (ALFA).

WHD is based in the Midwest, but the firm’s clients and their business interests extend around the world, challenging the firm to continually create higher standards for client delivery, as a function of increasing staff efficiency, firm collaboration, and enhanced mobility.

It is the firm’s focus on client satisfaction and client success that has also consistently driven the IT group, a 14 member, centralized team, to pursue value-added technology solutions for the staff and its clients. With this overriding mission in mind, Anna Boll, the firm’s IT project manager, and I, WHD’s IT Director, began our pursuit of selecting and rolling out a new dictation technology to our staff.

Evaluating Business Needs

From the outset of our evaluation, we quickly realized that the technology of dictating had rapidly progressed, from an antiquated, manual “dictate to tape” process to a “voice workflow” scenario, focused on delivering strategic IT and administrative objectives such as controlling equipment costs, enhancing attorney and staff productivity via mobility, and encouraging inter and intra-office teamwork.

Initially, one of our biggest drivers to making a dictation system change was the limited future availability of dictation tapes. Besides being an inefficient capture method, we always had to deal with tapes breaking, lost dictations, tape repairs, and the inability to efficiently get tapes into the right hands for on-the-fly transcriptions and processing. We quickly realized that digital dictation workflow was the answer, both from a cost and return-on-investment/ efficiency standpoint.

During the selection process, we paid a great deal of attention to the potential product’s overall ease of use- the end user interface would need to be intuitive so that support staff and attorneys could easily access and use the technology. We also wanted to team with a market leading technology with a strong legal following and reputable track record.

Selecting BigHand

What we realized after our thorough technology evaluation, was that BigHand is the only digital dictation product based on extensive market and product research from lawyers and IT support professionals- a critical factor for us in selecting a legal-specific solution. As it turns out, BigHand is also the leading digital dictation vendor in the global legal sector, maintaining the five largest sites at international law firms and with more legal installations in total than all other vendors combined. Add to that, the professionalism and expertise of the BigHand team, coupled with a feature and function list on target with all of WHD’s ease of use, stability, scalability and flexibility needs, and the final selection was a “no brainer”.

BigHand allows firm users, approaching 200 out of our total 300 member staff, to dictate using a handheld recording device that syncs the dictation files with the BigHand server or transcribe using a headset and foot pedal through an office PC or via the Web through a Citrix connection. In terms of usability, BigHand offers total visibility in one window, real-time tracking and pop-up alerts (to let secretaries know when a dictation is ready for transcription).

Rolling out BigHand

Simplicity best describes the BigHand digital dictation implementation. After starting with an initial pilot group, we rolled out a fleet of new Olympus (DS4000) digital dictation devices to the staff, and quickly completed desk-side training and troubleshooting, usually not exceeding 10 minutes per user. We also made sure that our department would be capable and available to field all technology and usability calls, and produced a flash digital dictation training video available on our intranet to further assist with training.

In those rare instances when we require outside troubleshooting help, we have been able to fully rely on BigHand's Chicago-based support desk and technical expertise. Beyond stellar Support, BigHand has also included us in its future product development plans and will work with its North American clients (much like it has with its 500 or so European sites) such as WHD on incorporating feature/function input into future product releases.

Why Use BigHand?

WHD has now been effectively using BigHand's digital dictation software for less than six months, but the benefits and positive feedback have already been plentiful. Here are several firm-specific examples:

Happy Attorneys. Utilizing BigHand's digital dictation workflow system enables the firm's attorneys to delegate dictations in a streamlined and automated manner, leaving them more time to focus on adding more legal value to clients. Although still in its infancy, we have already received glowing feedback from attorneys on our BigHand selection.

Security. Privacy, confidentiality and security are paramount to the nature of a law firm's work. Why risk having a lost tape or .wav being listened to or somehow obtained during the process of being delivered, sent, or stored? BigHand compresses and encrypts dictation to ensure that a law firm's need for total confidentiality and security is addressed.

Mobility. BigHand utilizes a combination of Citrix or Terminal Services (web access), Olympus dictation devices, and in the future, potentially BlackBerry compatibility (now available) to enable dictation to be sent back to office support staff immediately and remotely.

Teamwork. A system such as BigHand can create "virtual" teams, where secretaries in a department band together to turn work around quickly because they can see all the outstanding work tracked on screen.

Management Reporting. The BigHand digital workflow software gives us total visibility and tracking of management information across our users, departments and sites. Reports such as the number of dictations completed daily, number outstanding at the end of the work day, secretarial performance over time, are available to management.

Legal Systems Integration. BigHand can be integrated with our DMS so users can save precious time in the document creation process.

Overhead Costs. BigHand will save WHD valuable overhead costs due to the fact that dictations can be easily pushed to any available resources, regardless of location, work and vacation schedules, or sick leave.

Thin-client Support. The Citrix platform is increasingly popular within our firm as a remote connection solution and also as a way of bringing down IT support costs on a firm wide basis. BigHand's ability to reliably transfer voice over thin client infrastructures via Citrix has been a major selling point for our IT group and entire staff.

Overall, the rollout of BigHand has had a significant impact on our firm and our clients. Secretaries make fewer mistakes as the sound quality is clearer, document turnaround times are significantly improved due to the increased mobile and automated delivery method, and attorney's spend more time billing and on relationship management with the reduction in time spent creating their own documents.

About the Author

Alan Ciochon, Whyte Hirschboeck Dudek's Director of Information Technology since 2001, oversees a 14 member IT group responsible for firm-wide security systems, KM, Records Management, application development, networking and PC support, and the selection and implementation of productivity technology tools such as BigHand. Alan can be reached at aciochon@whdlaw.com.