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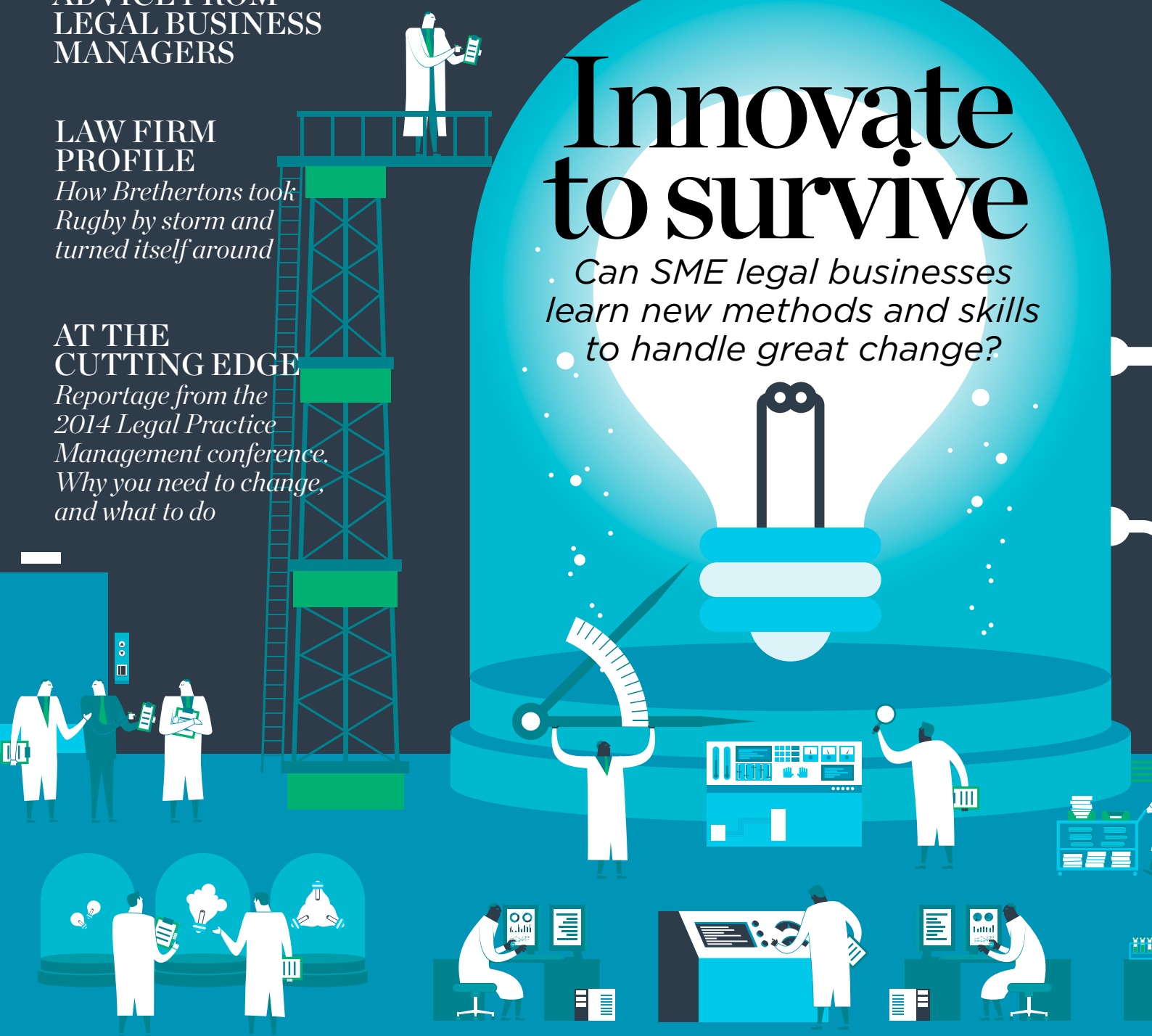
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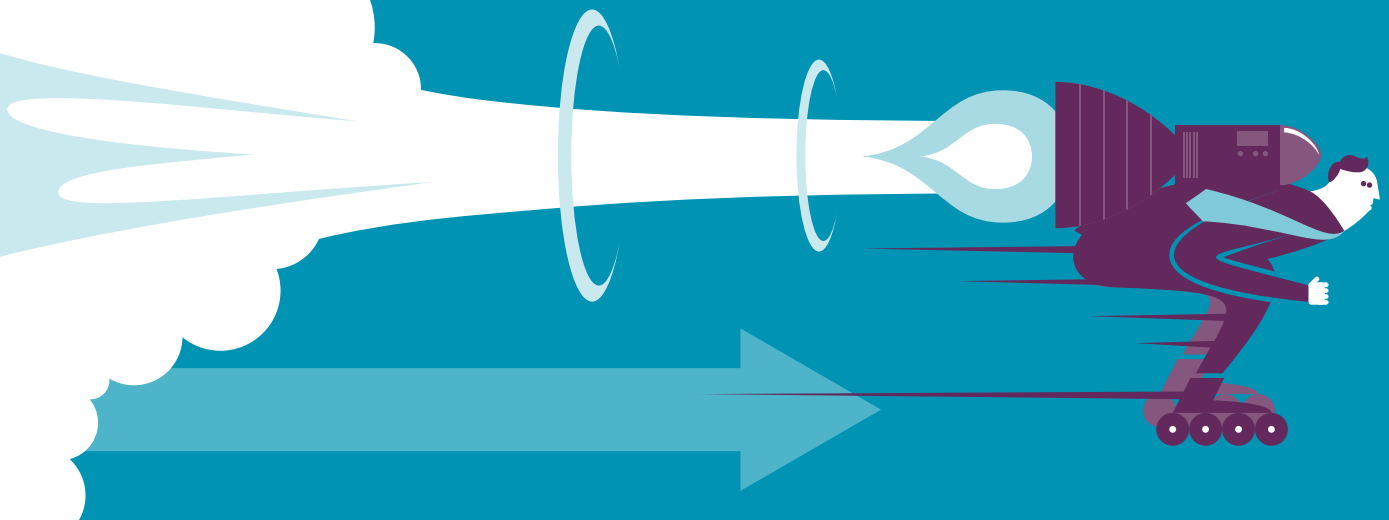
Innovate to survive

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BUSINESS INFORMATION FOR EVERYONE IN PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

POWERING PRODUCTIVITY



Graham Wright, practice manager at Platt Halpern, talks to LPM about using BigHand digital dictation tools to increase efficiency in a legal aid-driven business

Legal aid is about delivering access to justice for those who otherwise would not be able to afford it – but for law firms working under the legal aid scheme, this low-margin work needs to be good business, not just good deeds. Delivering that difficult double goal means driving down operational costs and increasing fee-earner capability.

Graham Wright, practice manager at Platt Halpern, a private client and legal aid firm, understands those challenges all too well. “Our challenge is to survive all the cuts and changes to legal aid, and we need to change and adapt to survive. BigHand has become a significant part of the journey towards making us more efficient, which helps us deliver legal aid work more cost-effectively.”

Back when Wright joined the firm in December 2012, the firm was using tapes for dictation – a slow and costly way to dictate. Moving to a digital solution had been pushed down the agenda in the past, but the cost of replacing analogue tape equipment was high, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to source. This was the perfect time for Wright to bring in the digital age at the firm.

Wright had worked with BigHand in his previous role at Howells, so he’d had first-hand experience of the benefits BigHand digital dictation could bring to a law firm. “I knew it would bring efficiency benefits to go digital, and that BigHand would be the key player to look at. BigHand specialises in UK legal, and I could vouch for the product and service.

DRIVING EFFICIENCY WITH DIGITAL WORKFLOW

Platt Halpern might be an SME but it has three UK offices and 33 staff. A multi-branch business can provide great opportunities for centralising some services, creating efficiency and reducing overheads. Using BigHand for digital dictation and moving completely away from tapes, the firm has slashed typing delay and created a new, more efficient way of delivering transcribed work.

A digital workflow has also helped to create a virtual central ‘pool’ of secretaries to handle dictations. “You can allocate secretaries and groups with BigHand, so we started with that to encourage cross-office working.” Now, the firm’s eight FTE secretaries pick up work created by all Platt

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BigHand is the leading digital dictation and speech recognition company, providing software that improves productivity, efficiency, utilisation of resources and, ultimately, profitability.

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Halpern's 21 fee earners across three offices. "There have been huge benefits from the outset," explains Wright. "Everybody shows common sense, picking up 'urgents' first, and work is easier – there's significantly more sharing facilitated by BigHand. It helps the firm organise and move the work, and it precipitates flexibility."

Several of Platt Halpern's secretaries had prior experience of using BigHand technology, which has helped enormously in rapidly transitioning to a more efficient, digital dictation workflow system. "BigHand has been accepted very well and has made things easier for everybody," says Wright.

The digital workflow enabled by BigHand is creating flexibility in the business, which may be one of the most important benefits of bringing BigHand to Platt Halpern.

"We can now cover more work, more effectively, and our typing backlog has just gone. This has improved client care, and things are just quicker. Turnaround is quick and it's easier to cope with demand, especially when we're stretched."

Coping with secretarial illness is an example of where the flexibility of digital dictation really benefits the firm. Work can still be easily processed, and consistency is ensured because communication with the client does not suffer.

BigHand's ease of use is also a big hit in the firm, says Wright. "All users found it very intuitive and easy to use. Some fee earners are more reluctant to change, and are not necessarily good with IT – but they have adapted and found it easy to use. Everyone's embraced it."

ENABLING MOBILITY, INCREASING EFFICIENCY

Perhaps more than at any other kind of firm, private client and legal aid fee earners spend a lot of time out of the office with clients. When it comes to mobility, Platt Halpern primarily uses BigHand for Blackberry, which has allowed fee earners to dictate and easily submit away from the company network.

"Our fee earners like dictating on the move, and BigHand has greatly increased their ability to do that," says Wright. The feedback he has had from one important partner – the head of the family

practice – perhaps says everything about how BigHand has aided the firm and its people: "She thinks it's brilliant. She could catch up with all her dictation on her Blackberry when away from the office at court and out of hours."

Quite simply, says Wright, mobile digital dictation means that fee earners don't have to wait – "they can dictate there and then, and the process works more quickly, so communication is better, and dictation is fresh in the mind, not done later from notes".

Beyond digital dictation, Wright is now looking at taking advantage of BigHand technology in a wider, more future-focused way – with speech recognition.

The vision for speech recognition in the firm is to free secretaries from lower-value work and help them into higher-value roles, opening up their skills and getting a lot more value from their roles.

"Using speech recognition, we can have the same number of support staff supporting more fee earners and doing higher-value work," explains Wright, "such

as administration, billing and personal assistant-type work. Plus there is the potential for them to do some fee-earning work, in a junior paralegal capacity, which develops their careers."

Speech recognition is a useful, capable tool for law firms, says Wright, and with BigHand, the level of accuracy is very good". It could bring huge process rewards to the firm, he says. Platt Halpern has already started implementing speech recognition and "it's already working well for some work currently done by fee earners".

From digital dictation to speech recognition, technology is playing a vital part in helping SME firms become more capable, more productive and more flexible, especially those that remain committed to legal aid work such as Platt Halpern.

In the short time since switching from tape to digital dictation, Platt Halpern has already seen significant financial and productivity benefits, says Wright. Just six months after go-live on digital dictation, "it's already changing the way the firm works, for the better. It speeds everything up, and it's easier and more efficient. It was an important change for us". **LPM**

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