

DLA Piper moves to remote-working practices in 36 hours during Covid-19 pandemic as a result of strong IT infrastructure and technology support



The COVID-19 pandemic has caused global upheaval and forced new, remote and home-working practices on organisations across all industries. For many law firms, traditionally slow adopters of new technologies and with well-established resource models underpinned by the office-based secretary-attorney relationship, the near-instantaneous transition to this new working environment would have been a threat to business continuity.

Nothing could be further from the truth for global law firm DLA Piper, which embarked upon a strategy to improve the efficiency of infrastructure services and introduce a collaborative administrative resource model as far back as 2011. This model, which includes BigHand Now, a legal-specific workflow solution, enabled the firm to move its entire staff to home-working over the course of 36 hours, while continuing to meet and exceed the legal needs of its clients.

New Administrative Model

DLA Piper had already established that the traditional one-size-fits-all administrative service model predicated on a one-to-one (or two or three to one) relationship between attorney and legal secretary was no longer sustainable. Moving away from this siloed way of working, DLA Piper developed a team resource model – replacing a single individual handling multiple tasks for one, or multiple attorneys with a multi-skilled, multi-level team to support a broader base of attorneys.

This model enabled DLA Piper to ensure assistants could focus on high-level tasks, delegating less advanced and administrative tasks to business professionals better suited to complete the work. The firm also created an invaluable foundation for knowledge sharing, underpinned by BigHand's task delegation and workflow tool, [BigHand Now](#).

Rapid Change Management

The solution was rolled out to all 28 US offices over a five-week period, a rapid deployment supported by a detailed communication and training plan, including webinars.

Automated workflows were created to support the delegation of work between teams, helping the firm to achieve more efficient use of resources, while also providing full visibility of other teams' work queues to track tasks and support work sharing.

Norma Spearman, Chief Legal Support Officer at DLA Piper, says, "The most important part of the onboarding process is to select a few workflow types, engage subject matter experts to provide a strong support system, which can be done remotely, and make sure business professionals understand their role within the team concept. Law firms are used to working in silos, but BigHand helped us to convey that there is a more efficient, better way of prioritising and getting work done."

Open to Change

DLA Piper's collaborative administrative resource model helped to facilitate the firm's transition of its entire workforce to home-working within 36 hours.

As Spearman explains: "When COVID-19 started to become more widespread, we realised the best option to protect the health and safety of our workforce was to move to 100% remote work. As part of that transition, we tapped into each of our assistants and had them reach out to each attorney to ensure they had BigHand Now downloaded on to their computers, and walk them through how easy it is to use the tool, before they left the office."

Sonji Le Blanc, Sr. Manager for Legal Support Services shared, "The message was simple: "Don't let your work get lost in email". With BigHand we can make sure it gets done. If the local team doesn't have the capacity, it's very easy to give it to someone who can do it right away and get your needs met."

For the past two years, the tool had primarily been used by administrative support professionals to delegate tasks, yet a new mindset and openness to technology from attorneys has led to an increased utilisation of BigHand over the past few months.

Le Blanc adds: "In April we have seen a 70%+ increase in tasks go through BigHand Now. Lawyers are now using technology in a way they've never had to before, recognising that this is the best way for them to get the task done and get it done well. It's the job of the support team to ensure that this happens seamlessly and efficiently."



To facilitate this flexible and agile approach, DLA Piper also created its Firm-wide Administrative Support Team (FAST). This team of eight, which includes legal secretaries spread throughout the country, now take on routine and large tasks that otherwise would have been outsourced, generating further cost savings. The team also works on extended hours so tasks can be submitted through BigHand up to 9pm PT to ensure rapid turnaround.

"While we were already generating year-on-year cost savings as we were utilising our resources more efficiently, we have saved a lot of time and money through BigHand in recent months simply by everyone embracing the value of working as smart as we can," Le Blanc adds. "And in parallel, there is a recognition of the value in the work our business professional provide, which has boosted team morale – a welcome benefit under the circumstances."

Extended Capabilities

In addition, BigHand Now has been adopted by DLA Piper as a collaboration and training tool, from attorneys entering tasks and teams effectively delegating work, to the ability for staff to actively choose which tasks they would prefer to undertake, even just one part of a job, and the opportunity to learn new skills from colleagues.

"The beauty of BigHand is that anyone with the relevant skills can pick up and complete work in a timely fashion," Le Blanc explains.

"However, people are now also communicating and talking to each other in ways they never did before, asking each other how a certain task was done, and asking for help. The distance has made them closer in terms of reaching out to each other.

DLA Piper is also extending the use of BigHand across multiple functions and is launching new shared dashboards to facilitate further efficiency and cost savings. Spearman explains: "We are continually identifying new applications for BigHand; from the creation of shared dashboards, to Operations, the aim is to make it a one-stop-shop for efficiency and time-saving. With everyone - particularly our attorneys - more open to change than ever before, now is the time to capitalise on the capabilities that technology resources like BigHand can offer."

Preparing for the Future

In addition to providing clear insight into task delegation, responsibility and efficiency, BigHand is also being utilised by DLA Piper to facilitate its continued preparedness efforts related to the pandemic.

With the infrastructure for remote working in place and proven, DLA Piper can continue to support its business professionals remotely, while also focusing on the physical aspects of preparing its offices for a return to work.

Le Blanc explains: "We are thrilled to have a tool like BigHand that, regardless of when and how people return to the physical office, facilitates business continuing as usual because we have the workflows in place to support staff regardless of where they are."



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- Norma Spearman, Chief Legal Support Officer



Conclusion

DLA Piper's original objective was to create a robust, collaborative model that ensured the right job was placed with the right people at the right time to better service timekeepers and leverage the value and skills of existing staff, while creating the collaborative administrative model to support the new practice of law.

As Spearman concludes, "The current practice of law looks like nothing we've seen before. And the byproduct of the work we've done with BigHand has provided important support to our business continuity. Because of the firm's business continuity planning, robust IT infrastructure, and technological tools like BigHand, we have continued to meet our clients' needs, despite the unprecedented challenges presented by this pandemic."