

# Wedlake Bell optimizes support provision for its lawyers and clients utilizing BigHand Workflow to gain operational visibility amid the Global Pandemic.

**Wedlake Bell has optimized its support function and remote working practices maintaining high-quality, quick support while also gaining vital operational visibility to drive business choices and secure the future of the firm.**

Social distancing measures have forced law firms, like many businesses, to rapidly adopt remote working practices and activate business continuity plans. With law firms typically used to traditional office-based working models, it is fair to say that some firms have managed the transition smoothly, thanks to available technology, and others have struggled to get up and running quickly.

To add to the sudden change of all-staff remote working, law firms have had to take steps to mitigate the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, making cost-savings to varying degrees, and taking advantage of temporary furloughing and internal restructures.

For Wedlake Bell, a London-based firm with 70 partners and over 170 lawyers and support staff, the shift to working from home was seamless thanks to strong continuity plans and robust IT infrastructure. The firm prides itself on delivering the best service to its clients, and has maintained its excellent service delivery, despite challenges arising due to COVID-19, thanks to BigHand's legal workflow solution acting to streamline task management and underpin the entire lawyer-support staff working model.

## Adapting to remote working

Wedlake Bell implemented BigHand Now in the later part of 2019 and has found the solution to be fundamental in achieving smooth provision of support for lawyers whilst working from home.

David Hymers, head of IT at the firm explains, "Similar to other firms we've had to quickly adapt to working en masse at home. Despite this change and with flexible working hours in place, our lawyers are still receiving excellent support from their secretaries – a service which is efficient, streamlined and easy to optimize thanks to BigHand Now."

The legal-specific workflow solution provides an effective way to manage work throughout the firm, by ensuring the right tasks are delegated to the right skilled resource, at the right cost to the firm, with all instructions gathered upfront.

Support staff can access one centralized view of the work and team leads have an effective way to move work around to suit current team capacity. Lawyers can easily track and assign tasks to the right support resource, and management can access actionable data around work types, volume, capacity and time utilization to enable informed resourcing conversations and decision making.

Sandra Pawley, business engagement IT specialist at Wedlake Bell considers the technology's capability to help firms at this time, "Firms need a way to track work and avoid billing write offs

that might occur from lawyers being over utilized with non-billable admin, and secretaries being underutilized as a result. BigHand can solve that problem."

## The delegation driver

In early 2019, the original drivers for implementing BigHand Now were to streamline and make more efficient the way work was delegated to the business support teams. The firm has five groups of legal support staff that each look after one or more practice areas. Although the support staff are pooled in these teams, it was apparent that utilization of support staff varied greatly. This problem was exacerbated by support staff receiving tasks in multiple ways.

David comments, "Lawyers would email the secretaries with work, or physically walk over and hand work to them, leaving no audit trail or visibility of its progress, or how much work was going through the firm in total."

"The reprographics team in particular struggled to deal with its workload at times. Work was delegated in many ways with lots of mailboxes to monitor. On more than one occasion, an important print job would be picked up and lost if that staff member went on leave, resulting in a last-minute rush to meet the deadline."



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Sandra adds, "David and I are members of the firm's Innovation Committee and from time to time the topic of support staff utilization had arisen during meetings. We knew anecdotally that on one side of the spectrum, one secretary might receive all their work from one or two lawyers, and on the other end, another might be receiving work from up to 10 lawyers. We wanted to understand the volume and progress of tasks, as well as staff capacity, and BigHand Now provided that visibility."

The firm were existing users of BigHand's digital dictation and speech recognition solutions which was one of the more effective technologies used by lawyers to delegate work. After assessing the market, the firm chose BigHand Now as a vehicle to drive operational efficiency in its support functions.

## People over technology

The project was approached as a people-led business initiative with key stakeholders engaged from the outset to ensure optimal adoption results. BigHand worked with Wedlake Bell to complete the firm-wide rollout to more than 230 users in a phased approach.

Sandra explains, "We decided to roll out over a six-month period, and the technology really only came in at the end of the project once we addressed the main adoption barriers internally. BigHand's expertise was invaluable in helping us to drive business engagement during this period, as well as throughout the actual technology implementation."

"We initially thought lawyer adoption would be a problem," David adds. "But it really helped that we only needed a simple upgrade from our existing BigHand system, making training requirements very minimal, so the lawyers could see the overall value from the offset."

With the technology fully rolled out the firm's initial adoption was high, with up to 200 tasks per day / 4,000 tasks per month being captured through BigHand Now. Work captured using dictation also increased by 2,000 records per month. These tasks were previously invisible to the firm, hidden away in email or by face-to-face delegation, with no way of tracking the work.

Sandra explains the benefits, "The centralized list of tasks has made the world of difference to our support staff. The reprographics team has been transformed, with lawyers reporting a significant drop in task-turnaround time, and a more efficient service in general."

"It has also helped our lawyers to recognize the impact on support staff in receiving work from multiple sources and via multiple methods".

## Hidden workflow benefits

The technology has had such a positive impact on the support function, that other business support teams are starting to adopt the technology.

"The more we know about the work passed through the business, the more information we have to make informed business decisions," Sandra comments. "Our head of marketing approached me about using BigHand Now to manage the marketing tasks received from lawyers and therefore cut down on email traffic. I spent some time understanding the types of work that were delegated to them such as client ebulletins, website updates and new business tendering support, and was able to easily get them set up with the correct workflows."

The new insight into the operational back-office is also bringing value to the HR team who, just over two years ago, worked with the business to introduce a new team assistant role to the support function. The new team assistants are responsible for non-billable admin work, freeing up the qualified senior secretaries and paralegals to work on higher-level chargeable tasks.

Sandra explains, "We share data insights from BigHand with our managing partner and HR Team. If a support team member leaves the firm, the insight from BigHand Now enables management to make an informed decision about the type of role we need to hire to replace the headcount."



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**Wedlake Bell**

## Looking to the future

After reaping the rewards of BigHand's workflow solutions, the firm will be among the first to adopt the latest version of BigHand, with its new reporting functionality, BigHand Insight.

"We first saw the latest version of BigHand at the annual User Conference and were impressed with its new features," David explains. "Although the technology works very well now, we are excited to see the effects of the new functionality on lawyer adoption, and hope to get the few lawyers not yet fully engaged with the tech, fully onboard with this version."

"The added reporting granularity with BigHand Insight will also help us to gain an even more in-depth understanding of our operational practices, which is critical for law firms right now. We are always impressed with BigHand's product roadmap, and this is just another example of them taking their client feedback on board in their technology development."

Looking to the future, as social distancing measures start to be lifted, the workflow technology is well placed to help with the transition back to office-working, and to provide much needed data to inform law firms on what their optimal structure is to support the firm's needs.

As David concludes, "Before the pandemic there was a reluctance to let legal support staff work from home, but now it has been proven that remote-working is effective regardless of your role. It would not surprise me if we see a shift towards a hybrid of part-office part-home working, and technologies like BigHand Now can help to optimize those scenarios by ensuring physical work is sent to those in the office, and other tasks to those at home. Having technology in place to manage these changes to working environments will be essential for law firms."

"For Wedlake Bell, BigHand Now helps to make everyone's lives easier by providing vital visibility into task delegation, progress and management, ultimately improving the service offered to our lawyers and clients. Crucially though, the aggregated data we now have access to ensures senior management are armed with the operational insight they need to make integral business decisions to secure the future of the firm."



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