You Want a Hole, Not a Drill.

Finding the Right Technology Solution at Law Firms

BigHand

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Law firms are constantly under pressure from clients to decrease costs while increasing efficiency. While the volume of work largely has not changed, firms are expected to do the same work with fewer staff and do it better and faster. Simply put - do more with less. To reconcile these seemingly conflicting demands, many law firms turn to technology as a solution.

The problem is that too often, firms focus on the technology itself, when the emphasis should be on the problems the technology is intended to fix. Technology is not a one-size fits-all solution. When firms invest in technology without clearly defining the challenges they hope to address, they are setting themselves up for failure. Dissatisfaction becomes inevitable, and firms typically end up blaming the technology for not working, when the blame more likely lies with the failure to properly define the problem, choose the right solution and then implement it.

First, Define the Problem

The simple analogy of a drill and hole perfectly sums up the mistakes many firms make when it comes to investing in technology.

The analogy goes like this: When someone buys a drill, the drill is not actually what they want. What they want is a hole, typically of a specific size. They purchase the drill because they believe that the drill will give them the result they seek, i.e, the aforementioned hole. The same is true of technology at law firms. Firms do not (or should not) want technology simply for the sake of having technology. Rather, they are seeking a solution to a specific problem, and the technology that best accomplishes that. It is not about the technology itself, but the results, benefit and value it delivers. Success, therefore, begins with clearly identifying the problem.

Start with narrowly defining the challenge your firm is looking to address.

To determine the significance of the problem, you must ensure all the relevant stakeholders are represented in the decision. Include all the areas that will be impacted by this decision, which may include, but aren't limited to, IT, HR, administrative support, fee earners, training, and even finance. Be sure to gather the relevant data (both qualitative and quantitative) from all areas in order to fully analyse the issue.

Identify Solutions

"So What?"

If after gathering data and performing a complete analysis, it is determined there is a fundamental business problem worth investing in, what is the tangible benefit that you are looking to gain by fixing it? Only when you are clear about what you want to accomplish, can you successfully choose and implement technology to achieve it.

The ultimate result you are seeking to achieve by implementing technology can be identified using an exercise called, "So what?" Often when reviewing technology, firms will get caught up in the features instead of the value it offers. To combat this, try drilling down to the true value by asking, "So what?"

As an example, consider a CRM solution that promotes a smartphone app feature. Start with the question, "So the tool has a smartphone app—so what?" Why is that important? Well, when the sales team is on the road, they can easily enter meeting notes and comments immediately following customer visits, "So what?" They will be more likely to capture important information accurately and fully, and the CRM system will be more valuable to the business because it will contain accurate information.

In the end, if the firm is looking for a CRM system that will deliver better data that can be leveraged for the business, then this technology is a good fit. Only by drilling down can you determine if the technology in question is truly a solution that will deliver the needed value. Don't let features drive your decision. Instead, clearly identify the problem, then review potential solutions and how they will solve the problem.

Successfully Implementing the Technology

Defining the problem and identifying the best solution to solve it are not the end of the story. Even the right technology won't help if you don't integrate it into your business in a way that will ensure long-term success. Ultimately, if users don't embrace it, you have not really solved your problem.

Technology implementation involves all of your employees, not just your IT department. In addition, commitment from the executive level on down is critical to success, and you need to determine how to keep everyone from human resources, IT, training, fee earners and support staff engaged.

The most obvious place to start with an implementation is with the people who are most likely to successfully adopt the new technology. Once they understand the direct benefits to them and to the firm, they can help to spread acceptance throughout the firm. However, be sure you don't just focus on the likely adopters. You equally need to involve the potential naysayers in the process and think about how the changes will impact the employees who are most resistant to change. Understanding the potential fallout is the best way to prepare for it. Piloting your new technologies to users on all parts of the acceptance spectrum provides the best likelihood for success.

Finally, do not lose steam once the pilot stage ends and you purchase the technology. It is crucial to maintain the same level of focus and enthusiasm throughout the broader implementation. It is also critical to revisit the process post-implementation (usually six months can be a good touch point) to ensure the technology is delivering the expected results and utilisation is where it should be.

Avoiding the Common Pitfalls

Trying to implement new technology on your own is a huge undertaking, and there is no reason to do so. Vendors offer the expertise necessary to help the process go smoothly, from the initial identification of the problem to the final maintenance stages. The right vendor will help you determine the end goal that you are trying to accomplish, and keep you focused on implementing the technology in a way that achieves it.

This involves having plans in place for training, implementation, and ongoing support, as well as monitoring important benchmarks and aggressively attacking problems if they arise. If it seems like your vendor is simply trying to sell you technology, rather than being honest about whether their products fix your problems, you should consult a different vendor.

In addition to helping you solve specific problems, vendors come with a network of valuable information. Even though your challenges are new to you, they are probably not new to the vendor who has worked with many other firms facing similar challenges.

They can share how other firms have managed similar issues, whether they were successful, and what errors they made, helping you avoid making similar mistakes. They may also challenge you regarding some of your thoughts or decisions. Don't be afraid to be questioned. Rather, embrace their knowledge and what they have learned through other firms' experiences. While technology certainly can greatly improve the practice of law, be careful not become enamoured with technology simply for technology's sake. After all, a drill is only good if it creates the hole you actually need!

Understanding your desired outcome is critical to successful technology implementation. If you first define what is essential and keep that in mind as you work to implement the solution, you will be more likely to reap all the benefits the technology has to offer. In the same respect, don't be afraid to confront your challenges and make a change. Change can be daunting, but it is the firm that is bold in confronting challenges and making changes that will be most successful.