MISSION CRITICAL IT

Making Business Thrive

INTERVIEW WITH
NEIL ANDREWS - PARTNER
TIM SKUE - IT MANAGER
COLES MILLER SOLICITORS

Commissioned by:

Tailor Made
TECHNOLOGIES
IT & Communications

Introduction

Interestingly, Bill Gates once said that "the advance of technology is based on making it fit in, so that you don't really even notice because it has become part of everyday life."

Interestingly, because within a timescale which is unprecedented in business, IT has moved from supporting function to in effect, controlling function. So what could the influence of IT be, say, five years down the line?

This is one of the interviews for a book commissioned by Tailor Made Technologies and to be published by DECISION magazine, in which businesses which are really focused on the relationships with their staff and customers, share what they consider to be the issues they have to get right in terms of IT.

Why it comes down to trust

How extraordinarily prescient was Sam Walton? When he founded Walmart in the 1960s, which went on to become the world's biggest bricks and mortar retailer, he declared "high expectations are the key to everything."

Of course he wasn't to know that as a consequence of technology, what customers look for would be increasing exponentially, but arguably the point he was making is even more valid today. If a service provider hasn't got the mechanisms in place to deliver that requirement (and beyond), then they're going to struggle.

"The best way to explain why?" muses Neil Andrews, partner at full service law firm for businesses and individuals Coles Miller, with six offices in Dorset. "I've been here thirty years and our business was established over 100 years ago and we've both survived decades of change in that time. How? Clients have to trust you, not just in terms of the advice they receive but in how it's delivered.

"That is the hallmark of providing professional services. Technology comes in to that massively because clients expect you to meet the standards they experience in other elements of

Neil Andrews

their lives, and if you aren't able to deliver what they require in the way they want, it results in a chink in that trust."

"If you think about the ways in which other sectors have deployed IT, what has happened is that technology has distanced them from their customers. Has it become easier to get in touch with your bank to actually discuss a requirement? It's a broad brush statement, but even if you do manage to speak to someone it's likely they're working to a formulaic script which won't necessarily address your specific issue.

"What should a service provider be looking for from IT? At the very least technology has to enable you to interact in the way the client wants as well as delivering efficiencies which will drive up service levels and profitability; IT means the two aren't mutually exclusive.

"In theory, IT makes updating the client and other parties easier than ever before. Within our customer relationship management system we can decide where the communication points should be and implement them automatically. So for

example, communication is dispatched to say we've putting in the local authority search for a home buyer, and when the search comes back, an automated status update is then sent out. But the meaning behind what has been uncovered, that's where human input comes in.

"Every service provider has got to keep up to speed to align themselves with customer expectations because if they don't, it's a differentiator but not in a good way. When the pandemic hit, being up-to-date determined whether firms had the capability to enable their people to work as effectively from home as they would in the office in terms of resource and service delivery."

"Evaluating new means of communication is interesting," says Andrews. "One of the things that excites me is the ability to have court documents scanned, OCR'd, and put into an e-bundle with

digital cross references. It means a bundle can be disseminated without the need to first cut down a forest, although we are talking about huge files.

"So bandwidth is going to be a continuing issue if a lawyer and their partner are both working from home and at the same time their children are also streaming their lessons. Suddenly people aren't going to be able to work effectively because they haven't got sufficient connectivity. There's that joke that if you want to call a family meeting, turn the router off and everyone will make straight for the room where it's located.

"We don't want to be in the vanguard but we have to be poised at least. Take WhatsApp. As a tool internally and for friends and family, it really hits the mark. But is it really becoming a standard form of communication in our sphere of work? The answer might be yes, but not quite how you'd expect.

"Let's say we're in a video conference on the court's platform. If we were in a physical courtroom, the judge can send us out to negotiate a point with the other party. I know there are breakout 'rooms' in Teams but we use WhatsApp to communicate privately with the client during the discussions, safe in the knowledge that WhatsApp is completely out of the loop as far as the other parties are concerned."

Social media and the ease with which anybody can use it to make reference to anyone about anything can create a conundrum. "Our profession's regulator wants the focus to be on quality reviews

because they want consumers to be able to make informed choices about which lawyers to use," says Tim Sque, IT manager at Coles Miller.

"But there is an inherent problem. If a law firm is doing divorce work, then even in the modern framework of what you could call collaborative law, there will be people who do not get what they want out of the process and can post a negative review about you, even when they weren't actually your client and haven't disclosed the fact."

According to Sque, law firms are approached by sales people all the time because there are so many new products out there. "On-boarding software is something they are pushing at the moment but you have to look at it from the client's perspective," he says. "By that I mean, will they benefit from the features? Technology needs to be used to support the process of building relationships, not just delivering efficiencies.

Tim Sque

"But I don't think you can introduce new IT processes piecemeal. Time and effort has to be put into project management, explaining the purpose, what's going to happen, and providing reassurance and support. Then the reaction from people is more likely to be 'why didn't we do this before?'.

"It's all about buy-in, but you have to demonstrate the advantage to someone in terms of what they will gain from it, rather than just outlining what the benefits are to the business.

"So mobile dictation using our smartphones rather than dedicated equipment was really a breeze to introduce. But there will always be pushback with change and it can simply be because of personal preference rather than resistance to technology. I'm the type of person who likes to read a printout and put in amendments manually, even though I could easily add those comments on screen in a Word document."

Sometimes though, time-honoured procedures have been impervious to technology, and there was nothing any firm could do about it. And then came the pandemic.

"Because wills are still based on nineteenth century legislation, the process which needed to be followed was old fashioned," says Andrews. "The testator had to have individual witnesses physically sign in their presence, but during lockdown, government had to introduce change so that people could witness in other ways, such as through windows (fenestration rather than Microsoft). Electronic signatures have been with us for a few years now but because of having to work around Covid-19, the e-doc with a digital signature is now becoming more of a norm."

Which brings us neatly onto cyber security. "Again, really it's a matter of trust between the adviser and client," says Andrews. "As a profession we are targeted because we handle large cash transfers. Conveyancing is probably where most attacks occur and procedures have to be in place so you don't take a digital communication as an authority to transfer money to a particular bank account. There should be a two or even a three-step verification process to protect the client and the service provider.

"We decided to become Cyber Essentials accredited because that is a fantastic exercise in highlighting the areas to concentrate on. It means we spend money in the right way and that includes an investment in training staff because the weakest link is usually the unwitting recipient of a rogue email."

"For an insurance policy, the proposal form would have had a box to tick if you wanted the addition of cyber cover," recalls Sque. "Now it's a multi-page questionnaire devoted to the subject because there is a need for full-on compliance, and cyber can be

covered by a separate policy. Could a firm's cyber security policy be a selling point? I suppose someone considering a particular law firm could ask about their cover."

A perhaps unexpected consequence though of implementing cyber security can be disruption. "A sensitive filter could reject an email from an estate agent you've been dealing with for years because they moved on to Office 365 and now have their own domain, so your system detects there is now a mismatch in the records and rejects their communication," Sque explains.

But perhaps the biggest impact of technology is just beginning to make an appearance. "In litigation, disclosure is regulated and massively, artificial intelligence will have an increasing role in identifying relevant documentation," says Andrews.

"In contract negotiations, a supplier might have the term which says something is to be done within a reasonable interval, but the purchaser could say well, that only means you tried; I want best endeavours. A silly hypothetical example maybe, but AI could be used to determine wherever the word 'endeavour' appears in the text, should it be prefaced by 'best'. But ultimately, and this is the crux of the point I'm making, there needs to be human interaction to validate it. Artificial intelligence can enable us to work through the contract faster and possibly more accurately, but there has to be someone to take responsibility."

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About Tailor Made Technologies

Since 1994 Tailor Made Technologies have been delivering professional IT, communications, cloud, and cyber security solutions for businesses, education and public sector organisations across the UK. Through their 28-year track record TMT have been ranked 6th best managed service provider in EMEA and 2nd in the UK, as well as being featured on The Sunday Times Fast Track list for a decade.

Accreditations include ISO 9001, ISO 27001, Investors in People, with TMT's 105 engineers looking after 2200 customers and 11,000 managed devices, meeting 96% of service level agreements.

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About DECISION magazine

First published in 1988, DECISION magazine reflects the business lifestyle, the trials and tribulations, the hopes and aspirations of directors and managing partners responsible for businesses with a turnover of £3million and above in the south of England and London.

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