



MISSION CRITICAL IT

Making Business Thrive

INTERVIEW WITH
ALISTER WILLIAMS
CHIEF EXECUTIVE
PALLANT CHAMBERS

Commissioned by:

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.

Deploying technology to take the initiative

“There can be a reluctance to take the lead with technology but what I think organisations don’t realise is that when they don’t make a decision, if they defer instead, then actually, in reality, they have made a decision.”

Alister Williams, chief executive/senior clerk of Pallant Chambers, home to some forty barristers, knows exactly what it is like to be faced with the choice of stepping up to the proverbial plate. But he saw embracing technology as the only opportunity to redress the potentially damaging commercial implications of Covid-19.

“In the first days of lockdown we put a lot of resource – time and money – into corporate videoconferencing and we were then able to take the initiative with clients and the courts to say we would arrange the hearings on their behalf,” he explains.

“We actually arranged some 2000 hearings through the pandemic. By doing that we deployed technology to make it happen, to add value. Without a shadow of doubt we gained business from taking the lead.”

Alister Williams



That's on the one hand. What Pallant Chambers had to address was the potential impact that technology can deliver with the other. If hearings are taking place by videoconferencing, without the need to factor in travel, it could be possible for a barrister to appear in three or four cases in a day. But does that possibility enable them to be consistently at their best? "My concern," says Williams, "is that rather than being used to free up more thinking time, technology instead prompts a chambers to simply take on more cases.

"So of course technology can create a tension. IT allows us to take on more cases but does that increase in productivity come

at a price, because what happens is that a service provider can find itself taking a factory, production line approach. I asked the question – can there be a faceless client or is there a human being at the centre of every case?

“Just because technology makes something possible, you don’t have to do it. Taking the factory approach is a cultural decision not a given. If you are prepared to grind things out, technology means that you can develop a bigger caseload from existing resources, but our approach is consciously more bespoke and to move away from the draw to take on more cases.

“You can make the point that with technology in the form of videoconferencing, a barrister can do a Manchester in the morning and a Bournemouth in the afternoon, but of course if we play on our competitors’ pitches, technology means they can play on ours.”

Whether virtual hearings will eventually be restricted to procedural matters is going to be a determining factor. A non-contested possession is also somewhat different to a fully contested public law hearing relating to injury, and Williams points out there are hundreds of different types of hearing.

“Barristers can be allocated work months in advance and if the case is expected to take say ten days, that makes it difficult to squeeze anything else in regardless of technology,” he explains. “Of course something can happen which is beyond anyone’s control. If we need to change barrister because of illness, which

is extremely rare, that's a big thing for us. I always like to make the call personally to the client or follow up to explain why we have had to make the changes and how we will be working in their best interests to manage the transition.

“In terms of capacity, we could take on five more barristers straightaway, but the question is whether there would be the right cultural fit, and again, that isn't determined by technology.”

Set up thirty years ago, Pallant have been shortlisted for the Legal 500 Regional Chambers of the Year award three times in the last decade, have received three judicial appointments (their barristers becoming judges) in the last twelve months, and have most local authorities in the south-east as clients.

Williams was deputy senior clerk at one of the country's leading sets (the chambers of Lord Goodhart QC) before joining Pallant as chief executive/senior clerk in July 2000. At the time there were ten barristers, which dropped by two when crime was swiftly taken off the roster. By the spring of 2022 that number had risen to thirty-eight.

The name was changed from Chichester Chambers to Pallant (a place name redolent of the city) so the focus was on the skill-set rather than being geographically specific. Subsequently, 'annexes' have been opened in Southampton and London.

“Back in the day,” Williams recalls, “the legal profession relied on logistics to deliver the volume of paperwork it generated. We

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would receive two sacks of mail from Document Exchange every day. Now virtually everything is digital, with encrypted systems, and although the pace of change had begun to pick up five years ago, Covid-19 and the need to enable the profession to work remotely rather than from where the paperwork is located has been a real accelerant.

“But there is a different skill in finding your way around electronic case notes and the arms race for IT is to make it as intuitive as possible.

“Does hybrid and digital working mean it is no longer an imperative to occupy this amazing listed Georgian building in the centre of the city? Our private clients would expect this ambience, but our local authority and business clients? I suppose you could say we have one set of clients expecting to sink deeply into the carpet, and another who thinks that’s an unnecessary luxury.”

Regardless of location, there’s an over-riding issue which technology has created. “Data security and reputation

management now sit together,” says Williams, “and if a data breach happens, any service provider could be at real risk of losing their key clients no matter how good the relationship it has with them.

“A service provider is only as strong as their reputation, and technology has another influence because it makes it easy for anyone to comment about anything online. I remember an uncomplimentary review not from our client but the opposing party they had taken to court. I realised that with the dark side of technology, just how difficult it is to get hold of anyone who can remove a malicious review.”

Pallant adopt cyber-security safeguards such as having email operating separately from their main system, and passwords which are changed every month. “I constantly have to look at where the risks could be coming from because cyber security isn’t something you just do once,” says Williams.

“You have to be brilliant to deal with phishing emails and we apply the ‘be cautious before you are curious’ rule. We received an email properly branded from a leading QC inviting the recipient to look at an attached document. Applying the rule we asked ourselves the question, why would they be emailing us when we don’t have a current case against them?

“But here is a balance between being able to identify phishing and ensuring essential material doesn’t automatically go into quarantine when actually it’s needed for court the next morning.

“In our internal newsletter we are constantly updating advice about the risks and of course the irony is that it provides links to click for more information, although it would have to be an incredible phishing exercise for a hacker to write a four-page report about our chambers masquerading as our newsletter.”

“My frustration,” muses Williams, “is that the best an organisation will have is partial knowledge of the technology they now completely rely on. Especially when something goes down, where there is a feeling not just of frustration but vulnerability.”

And in terms of *modus operandi*, technology can still be surprisingly clunky. “With remote hearings,” explains Williams, “the client can be in one place, the judge somewhere else, and the barristers in different locations as well, so if we need to take instruction from the client we have to hold a side conversation with them on a secure WhatsApp call using a separate mobile phone. But there must be a better secure solution which isn’t disruptive if we aren’t able to simply lean across the table and talk to the client because they’re alongside us.

“What excites me though is that technology continues to provide untapped opportunities. For instance there hasn’t been a chambers to my knowledge which provides quotations online. You could ask whether that is something we should be offering, but online doesn’t have to be a commodified approach.

With more complex insurance applications on line for example, if particular data is entered such as proximity to a river, then

there is human intervention. Something which would be simpler to introduce is a system to enable clients to book an appointment with a barrister online; having access to their availability wouldn't result in any compliance issues.”

www.pallantchambers.co.uk

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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