

Internet Newsletter for Lawyers: Barristers' Extra

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Managing a Modern Chambers - Hardwicke Building

by Ann Buxton



In the IT world, the pace of change is frighteningly fast and doing nothing is not an option. Chambers have often lagged behind the commercial world or larger solicitors firms in their use of IT. Even now, there are some chambers where individual barristers do not have an email account and there is no overall network. However, Hardwicke Building, see www.hardwicke.co.uk, has kept up with the pace of change as far as IT progress is concerned, not just to keep our IT staff gainfully employed, but

because we know that using technology effectively is part of the service that our clients require and is a vital tool for our barristers to do their work in the most efficient and effective manner.

Hardwicke Building was the first chambers to employ a full time IT Manager and he ensured that we had the infrastructure to take advantage of many of the advances in IT that swept through the world of work in the nineties and early noughties. This put in place a robust framework for our barristers, enabling them to adopt the use of email, a central file server for their personal work and for shared information, and an intranet to assist with internal communication and organisation. We also recognised the potential which websites can have for marketing purposes and we received Intendence's Best Barristers' Website awards in 2004 and 2005.

Recent years have seen significant investment at Hardwicke Building to ensure that we maintain the pace. These upgrades and changes have focused on improving communications and productivity. In particular we have recognised the need for our barristers and staff to be able to keep in touch whether they are in the office, at court or abroad. Remote working and flexibility is becoming vital and fits in with the ever growing demands of our clients. 9 to 5 is but a distant memory and 24/7 perhaps not quite here, but is becoming a requirement under some circumstances and for some clients, so, whether we are support staff or barristers, we are moving in that direction.

Success stories

Probably the greatest "win" for us recently was the introduction of a virtual private network (VPN), which now allows all barristers and staff to work from home, an airport

lounge or a flat in Antibes in exactly the same way as they would if they were in chambers. We also support Blackberrys for all members or staff that need them and the number of users is growing week by week, enabling our users to view their mailboxes remotely. Our members are also moving toward using their Blackberrys for making phone calls and sending SMS, rolling all the common devices into one.

Online legal research services, too, have helped barristers deliver their services in a cost-effective and timely manner, bringing research tools to their desks. All members of chambers have access to a wide range of case law databases, by means of Lawtel and Justis, and individual teams subscribe to further specialist online resources.

Other services we have recently introduced include digital dictation, with an outsourced typing supplier to supplement our very busy in-house typist. This has both efficiency and cost benefits for chambers and the barristers. We can minimise the fixed cost of providing in-house typing and cope with spikes in demand by outsourcing work when there is a sudden rush of urgent work (it always is urgent, isn't it?). In addition, we are now able to cope with tube strikes, illness and holidays, so providing our barristers with an uninterrupted service: a minor, but nevertheless, useful way of using new technologies.

We have also changed the way that we actually manage and support our services, having outsourced the core management of our servers, daily back ups, security, anti virus and anti spam to a company called oncoreIT (www.oncoreit.com). The anti-virus and anti-spam systems are run through an outsourced, commonly used scoring system, overridden by black and white lists that either deny or allow messages transit to our network.

Our outsourcing partner manages the email and maintains a 24/7 remote monitoring service to ensure that the full range of services is available at all times. It's one of the S***'s law principles that just when a solicitors needs something urgently or a barrister is about to go to court, the system has a little hiccup. We try to avoid any service interruption, hence the need for the constant monitoring.

Planned changes

We are also looking at ways to drive down the costs of our telephone services and to enhance connectivity. Hardwicke Building currently use an Index analog phone system which is no longer being manufactured. Support will continue for a few years to come, but the smart operators move away from failing systems before they fail. A voice over internet protocol (VoIP) controller would allow the gradual migration of the system to new technology by taking over the management of the existing phone network and initially extending it to members' homes before beginning to replace it. This digital phone management system would also provide us with massive data collection opportunities

compared to our current system. Correct analysis of the call records could yield hugely beneficial data for marketing, cost cutting, and the monitoring of resources. These are the benefits of a properly integrated system, with IT and telephony swapping data seamlessly.

VoIP as a specific technology and as a straight replacement for Hardwicke's existing telephone system is of only limited interest. However, it introduces a fundamental change to the nature of the network. A VoIP network is digital, and can therefore be integrated into the internet. Many of our barristers have already invested in a broadband connection at home; using this infrastructure, a VoIP system can extend without difficulty over the internet and into their homes, joining them to the office phone network. As they already have connections through our firewall to our office data network, this completes delivery of the nearest possible re-creation of the "at desk, in chambers" working experience.

As far as our website is concerned, we see it is a bit of a Forth bridge. We have been delighted with the recognition our site has had from the two Intendence prizes, and we believe that we offer a well-structured site, with good graphics, clear navigation and good quality content. However, we are about to start a complete rebuild of the site in order to take advantage of the possibilities offered by a content management system, which will eliminate the bottlenecks created as a result of all content changes currently having to be done by technically skilled staff. Our planned changes will allow our barristers to add content, change their CVs and add articles and new cases to the system with minimal training. Mayhem will be avoided by cunning programming, or so we are told, and we will be able to keep a regular flow of new information on the site to keep our clients coming back.

That is just a start — let us call it Phase A. Phase A will not make much of a change to the actual appearance of the website, other than freshening up the image and making small improvements to navigation, but we have ambitious plans which really will make visible changes. Phase B will link into our marketing, key client and client relationship management programs, capturing data and enabling our clients to personalise their use of our website.

Data archipelagos

This leads on neatly to the whole marketing, management and data conundrum we face. Like the vast majority of chambers, we use Meridian, now taken over by Mountain, (www.mountainsoftware.co.uk), to manage our diary system. Since Mountain software also bought Ace, there is now only one near monopoly supplier to the Bar, although a new entrant to the market, InQuisita (www.inquisita.com) has made some inroads, currently supplying 29 chambers.

So, as long standing users, how does Hardwicke evaluate the product? Well, it's a bit like the curate's egg: good in parts. It is fair to say that it is a robust system, which efficiently handles the core services needed to manage diaries, keep records of our barristers' activities, their billings, case records, and basic (dare I say, very basic) data on our client base. However, we have become increasingly exasperated by what it does not do, and the implications this has for chambers as a whole. One of the most frustrating aspects is the difficulty of extracting data for marketing and business development purposes. This has been partly resolved by the useful add-on product Chambers Analyser.

We have taken the decision that as a marketing tool neither product is sufficient to our needs and we have installed Act!

from Sage to capture and analyse information on our client base and to manage all our marketing events. It is an annoyance to have to maintain two databases, but we judge it to be a necessary annoyance, since otherwise we would be unable to address the data needs of our marketing program.

My IT manager has taught me that the term for this is "data islands"; actually, like most chambers, we have a "data archipelago". Our advances in IT have certainly made barristers more efficient and effective, but until these archipelagos are brought together, the business element of chambers will remain severely inhibited.

The future

Looking to the future, the need is for a management system that does diaries, rather than a diary system that nods in the direction of the rest of the business. The long-heralded update to Meridian may resolve these problems, and, indeed, the early demos are promising. But whether Meridian, Inquisita, or any other entrant into the market can provide a comprehensive business tool for chambers of the 21st century remains to be seen. If they can, there will be significant implication for the way that chambers are run, and in particular the role of the clerks. Any chambers that wishes to prosper needs to embrace the challenges and opportunities afforded by the rapid development of IT.

Ann Buxton is Chief Executive of Hardwicke Building, see www.hardwicke.co.uk, where she is responsible for the management of chambers, leading the staff team, and for implementing chambers' strategic plan. Ann has had a wide experience of working with professional service organisations and has worked as a management consultant and in marketing. She has an MBA from INSEAD and has contributed to several publications on management issues.

The 70 barristers in Hardwicke Building offer specialist but complementary areas of expertise including Commercial, Insurance, Property, Employment, Family, Personal Injury, Clinical Negligence, Public Law, Housing and Education. The set is one of the most progressive, well-managed sets at the Bar. Financial performance is strong and the set has invested in management, finance, IT and administrative structure to enable it to meet ambitious growth targets.

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Note - this article is also part of the new e-book and course (allowing the user to gain 5 hours CPD) **Changing Practice for Barristers**, written and published by Nick Holmes and Delia Venables. The e-book contains sections on changing IT, changing practice management, marketing online, providing legal resources online and changing libraries. It costs £40 plus VAT for the single user version or £100 plus VAT for a chambers licence, allowing 5 people to gain the 5 hours CPD. The course is carried out entirely online.

For more information or to purchase the course online, see www.infolaw.co.uk/ebooks/legalweb.htm. (Please note that it can *only* be purchased from there).

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