Remaking the legal business

Process-led working, mobility, centralisation, outsourcing, new working methods, specialist units and more – how legal is being reconstructed, right now

Interview
Richard Jones
The man who’s reformatting Wragge & Co for a more mobile, more agile future

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Goodbye to all that...
How legal operational leaders are deconstructing firms as they head into a more process-led future

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There's no point in creating workflows and processes in a law firm unless you understand how work is done, how it should be done – and how it could be done better. There's often a disparity between those two visions: how work is done now isn't necessary how it ought to be done. If you want to re-engineer a law firm to make it more efficient, risk-managed and profitable, you have to go back to the source.

The people at Maclay Murray & Spens are by now experts at workflow – Crawford Hawley-Groat, the firm’s IT director, says the firm reviewed its BPM and workflow options back in 2007. “Our ethos is to ensure processes enable our business rules to be followed, reduce risk and allow things to be done in the right way.”

This meant prioritising business process management across the business, not just around fee-earning tasks. “To gain real efficiencies, on top of legal process mapping, there’s a huge amount of business overhead that needs to be managed and optimised. Billing was high priority, alongside matter inception and document creation processes and workflows.”

Hawley-Groat and the team wanted to cover all those bases, so he and the firm sought out an enterprise-wide BPM solution, not just a case management solution – and decided on Thomson Reuters’ FloSuite Legal platform. Now in parts of the firm’s business, such as probate and executor work, all work is done in a FloSuite Legal workflow in a completely “end-to-end” way.

Crawford’s more aware than most that a huge part of BPM is reviewing and mapping the firm’s working practice, and to why things are done the way they’re done. “Before you get into FloSuite you have to understand what you need to achieve and build a picture of what you need to do. This means taking a big step back – not just creating an electronic version of what you do now, but thinking and working out how we could be doing it better – re-engineering the processes.”

Automating billing, for example, meant going back to first principles – asking what the firm was trying to achieve, he says. “That doesn’t necessarily mean reducing the number of steps. It can mean that, but that shouldn’t be the end-game.” This kind of approach is a huge task for a firm – not least for fee earners and
senior management. So sponsors and champions are vital. “It was key to have the whole concept of BPM sponsored at chief executive level from first inception”.

Rethinking the blueprint

“We wanted to be sure to reduce business overheads, manage risk and capture better management information on financials. But one of the benefits that we found very early on was that stress – and therefore risk – has been reduced.” Plus, he says, more junior staff can carry out steps in less time, which equates to significant cost savings.

MMS is also seeing finance management benefits from BPM. “We have much better visibility of what’s coming through the business. We can see and report more quickly on billing.”

It’s the joining up of processes, and consequently the business, that delivers the biggest rewards from BPM, he says. Using built-in APIs FloSuite Legal can connect to the firm’s Thomson Reuters Envision case management as well as the other business systems. “For example, workspaces in iManage are created automatically as part of the inception process, but only once the correct processes according to business rules and current legislation have been carried out.”

Integration is key to compliance. “During matter inception it’s not left to individuals to remember and interpret legislation correctly,” says Hawley-Groat. “Being right is the starting point. There is less duplication, better validation. It’s constantly and consistently removing risk from the way we work.”

But a robust inception process isn’t just about process and risk – it creates revenue. “When it comes to billing, you now have all the correct data as a matter of course,” says Hawley-Groat. “FloSuite saves the firm money every month. Going from a paper-based system to this means we no longer have people working overtime one weekend a month. Billing also takes less fee earner time, so we have reduced lost chargeable time.” This cuts work-to-cash days dramatically, which creates revenue – it’s well known that the closer you bill to when the work is done, the better your recovery rate.

A firm-wide BPM solution also integrates MMS as a multi-site firm. “A fee earner opens a matter in London and a task can be automatically allocated in another office, paving the way for helping with managing firm wide work load even more in future.”

Across Maclay Murray & Spens processes are now connected and less onerous as a result of the process analysis work and the BPM solution from Thomson Reuters FloSuite Legal. But it’s about people, not process, says Hawley-Groat. “A slick, easy to follow process allows tasks to be done more easily in less time. If you dread doing something, you put it off.”

No surprise then that the next reforms at MMS are in expenses and time recording…

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Crawford Hawley-Groat, IT director, Maclay Murray & Spens

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