



How thriving are your IT and Business Process Systems?

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Surprisingly In an industry where business process and continuity are 100% dependent on IT and IS Strategy, the area of IT Systems procurement; Managed IT services, Business process design and E-Strategy has always been a case of balance of economies for the Law firms. Today, Law firms face increasingly tough and complex decisions concerning:

- Profitability and Sustainability
- Company wide IT Strategy
- Non performing business process
- Strategic growth and vision
- Diversification and globalisation

We shall discuss the issues that prevent law firms from implementing a IT Governance framework which in turn will help them in tracking, monitoring and measuring their core processes and their IT systems.

In the process, we will also have answered some key questions and understood why they also leave themselves vulnerable to such complex scenarios and tough- to- resolve situations.

1) IT Governance

IT is essential to manage transactions and process information significant for the growth of the law firm. While many law firms recognize the potential benefits that IT can yield, the successful ones also understand and manage the risks associated with implementing new technologies. Among the many challenges and concerns today facing law firms are:

- Aligning IT strategy with the business strategy
- Cascading strategy and goals down into the law firm
- Providing a structured framework that facilitate the implementation of strategy and goals
- Insisting that an IT control framework be adopted and implemented
- Measuring IT's performance

Simply put, Law firms must promote effective and timely measures to address the above mentioned concerns. The Partners and the executive management must create a IT Governance strategy to address Risk Management, IT and Business integration Performance management and Quality value delivery. It is very important to measure the goals, objectives and mission of IT at each level to ensure they are being delivered to the entire firm in a agreed framework.

IT Strategy must be able to extend law firm's mission, strategy and vision for growth, profitability and sustainability.

2) Lack of IT and Business integration

Very often law firms view IT as a "cost" rather than a "investment". They fail to put in various measures which can monitor, manage and improve their IT at each level. ROI's are not measured, not understood and not given their due importance. Secondly Business strategy or Strategic vision of the law firm is viewed as separate and though it is always carefully integrated with various areas of the business such as Marketing, HR, Accounts, Billing, Administration somehow IT is always ignored.

Partners or fee earners fail to acknowledge that in order for IT to start generating positive returns they need to implement a COMPANY WIDE IT STRATEGY thus encompassing all the sections, sub sections and core business processes of the law firm.

For eg: Business continuity solutions

Business continuity solutions are though an integral part of a law firm's Business strategy; they are at the same time, using IT and Information Services strategy to implement the strategy. Thus the seamless integration of two provides a complete solution designed to maximise disaster recovery services, justify your cost and measure the returns.

3) Understanding the difference between “Cost cutting” and “Reducing Operational costs”

Law firms very often believe that cost cutting translates into:

- No to upgrade or update for your IT Systems
- No to Managed IT Services
- No to IT Monitoring or performance measurement
- No to E-Strategy

Whereas they fail to take into account the following results that arises from their action:

- Your Core systems that rely on applications such as Accounting, Billing must be updated or upgraded to reduce rising IT Administration costs and Poor Performance.
- Old, outdated systems are highly unreliable against complicated cyber attacks, security breach, user policies and risk to data theft and business. They are also unable to give maximum functioning with your core applications.
- Employees and staff blame slow IT systems and applications for their lack of timely performance. This also results in Lost work + Lost Productivity + Loss of time, money and resources.

Whereas when we refer to the term “REDUCING OPERATIONAL COSTS” in IT it is often meant as harnessing the very same IT Systems and IT Strategy to realise various financial and operational benefits such as:

3.1 Upgrading to faster processing systems or shifting to a thin computing model will eliminate your issues concerning:

- 1) Employees and staff performance
- 2) Cost reduction

Benefits of thin clients:

- cost less
- are much easier to manage
- are more reliable
- are more secure than PCs.

3.2 Implementing Security procedures, User policies, Internet usage policies

- 1) Investing in Security procedures and formulating security policies for all users to implement results in having not to deal with costly and expensive security breaches, legal implications involving data theft, access to unauthenticated users
- 2) Internet usage policies will help you prevent and monitor your employees use of internet. A recent survey by the PixAlert and CIPD, 1 in 2 UK employers were unaware of how internet is misused by employees during their work time while they surf on unsolicited and banned websites thus resulting in rising Legal hassles, disciplinary actions, Loss of time, work, money and employee productivity
- 3) The same survey also revealed that Though employers in UK and US perceived highest threats would emanate from the Internet and email and attachments followed by other threats such as embedded and zipped files, WiFi networks, cellular phone cameras, non-enterprise controlled networks, memory sticks,

encrypted files, DVDs and CDs companies across UK were quite complacent about implementing strict IT and internet usage policies thus increasing their risk and exposure to legal implications, virus attacks, data theft and corruption, and negligence.

- 4) Instead of continuously fire fighting, It is now absolutely necessary for law firms to proactively use IT systems and strategy to combat and prevent work place issues arising out of misuse of firms resources. This will result in reduced costs and costly legal hassles, employer grievances, security breaches and loss of data, time and money

3.3 Scalable ICT Infrastructure

Law firms must be able to react fast to market developments and their business requirements. There fore it is imperative that they implement scalable, flexible and agile networks and systems which can cope and expand to accommodate increasing workload and ensure sustainability.

This ensures at times that you do not need to procure expensive systems and applications just to keep up with increase in workload, business and revenue. This type of strategy also aids while migrating to different platforms .

3.4 Managed IT

Effective IT Management will help in reducing costs by streamlining and integrating your IT and business by focusing on:

- 1) Performance Management
- 2) Business process design
- 3) Monitoring
- 4) ROI
- 5) Change management
- 6) Project Management

This not only leaves you free to focus on core areas of your law firm but also benefits your entire business processes as true integration is achieved thus eliminating road blocks in the way. Seamless integration and management will help your IT systems and business to manage and cope up with Change in your industry affected by changes in legal IT developments and Political and economic trends. Certain other key issues can also benefit in reduced operational costs:

3.5 E-skills training

Poorly trained employees, fee earners, paralegals or admin staff will result in their

- 4 Inability to use and implement IT (for eg, intranet, website, emails, and more)
- 5 Low performance
- 6 Inability to manage with increasing workload

This often translates into:

- Waste of firm's investments in IT
- Poor ROI
- Staff and employees feeling left out in this Information technology takeover

E-skills do not mean more investment. On the contrary UK govt has introduced certain e-skills training program through their IIP (Investors in people) program and also through LSC

(Learning and skills council) This program are heavily subsidised and employers can often take advantage of funding programs available to them.

3.6 E-Strategy implementation

E-strategy means Ecommerce strategy or you can call it Online business solutions. Whatever you prefer to call it, E-strategy helps the fee earners and partners to promote the services of the law firms and generate revenue for the law firms in terms of more clients and business. Today the UK legal industry is facing some of the toughest challenges. The practice of law is changing. Legal practices are being stripped of their historical protections and slowly their privileges are being eroded.

In such a scenario, pressure is continuously mounting on the fee earners to earn more for their firm. Law firms can avoid their dependency on their "star" fee earners by developing a business model to automate some parts of their practices which are volume driven rather than margin driven such as E- Conveyancing, Online Wills drafting , Online Personal injury to dispense certain processes that require manual intervention and generate more volume of business and revenues.

Thus careful and proactive implementation of the above mentioned strategies can result in Direct Cost savings benefits for the law firm

4 Customer Care

Law firms have long since taken their customers for granted and assumed that the client has a greater need for a lawyer while the tables have long since turned. Today with numerous law practices around, US Law firms entering the field, Overseas firms from India and other parts of Asia competing for the same share of pie, Darwin's theory of Survival of the fittest sounds quite relevant.

Fee earners must change their attitude to " I must be proactive, satisfy the client, and help the firm earn more fees" . Non -legal businesses are more customer driven rather than law firms thus having efficient, and effective customer care policies and procedures in place. While their legal counterparts lag behind in understanding the reasons for the same and fail to see the co-relation between profits and satisfied clients.

Summary:

Every law firm must implement procedures and policies that aid them in tracking their core processes, IT systems and networks, and E-strategies to maintain a productive and profitable IT and Business model. In order to realise the true potential of IT, law firms must increasingly turn to create a framework that helps them accrue positive returns on IT and benefit in the long run. No more viewed as a "stand alone" strategy IT is placed in the core of all your business processes and functions as ranked in terms of significance. More important is for law firms to find a IT and Business service provider who understands, studies and analysis their core processes before offering any solution. Thus ensuring IT and Business processes aligned and thriving at all times

The bottom line?

" Information technology service provider, IT heads, CIO or IT Consultant shoulder the greatest burden on their shoulders and that is the burden of carrying business processes and law firms to a new era of organised IT and Business framework in order to help businesses respond, react and manage change, competition and costs more effectively."

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Our experience in providing I.T outsourcing, application management, managed hosting, desktop support, maintenance; risk management and infrastructure design and implementation services enable organisations to improve productivity and continuity while reducing the cost of managing their I.T infrastructure.

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