PRODUCTIVITY: THE CHALLENGES AND EVOLUTION OF LEGAL TECHNOLOGY

By Rowan Caffull

There's no doubt that virtually any business that employs staff has thought about their staff productivity in recent months. In many cases, the pandemic has bought about extensive business model challenges, new ways of working and new ideas for how to adapt and change. But should the pandemic really be the reason that happens? Evolution equates to survival in business as well as life.

As COO of a very successful barristers Chambers, I thought I'd share a series of articles on productivity, how technology supports and enhances our business, and how legal sector is taking huge developmental leaps that will benefit our businesses and our clients extensively.

I have always had a keen interest in IT. From a young age, I spent time learning from family members how computers work. I even had a go at building my own! I was fortunate in that my family were early adopters of the Internet. Living in our house in the early 90s was a bit like Mission Impossible. I recall having ethernet cables trawled around the house to manage our access, way before the heady days of WIFI arrived. But I loved it.

My passion for tech evolved and transferred to the workplace where my focus has always been to use it to tackle inefficiencies. Seeing average tasks being done in an inefficient manner is a frustration for me. But the learning curve of time and experience has taught me that not everything can be changed overnight. Some people struggle with change. Some people struggle with technology. Some people struggle with both and that's fine; we should all play to our strengths. Mine happens to be enhancing productivity, particularly through technology.

I have spent time studying managed change and implementation tactics in an effort to continually streamline processes. Now I am using all that knowledge to implement change at The 36 Group.

As an organisation, The 36 Group and its members are extremely patient when it comes to change. People are willing to adapt and try new technology to enhance their own experiences and some may argue, that's the biggest battle; user cooperation.

Over the last 10 years, we have rolled out a number of systems that really dig down and focus on the improvement of efficiency and performance. Not all of those systems are applications, some are simple processes. For example, in 2012 we took the decision to move towards a paperless environment. We invested many hours sourcing the best document management system for our use case – one which ensured security and usability, and then went on to spend hours scanning every document that came into Chambers to store in our new, secure environment. Overnight we cut our postage and courier costs by over 50%. Of course, the redeployment of staff to complete the back scanning had to be offset against those savings, but it wasn't just about a cost-saving. The broader view was that this move encouraged clients to correspond electronically. This saved them time and money and so we were able to pass on some of those savings. And of course, we were pleased to do our bit towards environmental ethics as we considerably reduced our paper usage. 2020 saw many other businesses in our sector forced to follow suit and it's further enhanced our digital communications with those businesses and our wider audiences.

Obvious to all, one of the biggest tech winners in 2020 was Zoom. We were early adopters of the system, rolling it out as our main video conference platform back in 2017 and eventually installing the system in our conference rooms during our 2018 office move. Without doubt, the simplicity of the system is what makes it so successful. That old adage about user error being the reason for 99% of issues is pretty much eradicated because the user experience in Zoom is just so good. By the end of 2018, we were holding an average of two video calls every day, which we thought was high usage, but is insignificant in comparison to the near 100 a day we currently consume. How times have changed...

The other large tech change within Chambers over the last few years was the rollout of Office 365, with Microsoft Teams. Looking back, this change (among other positive changes) was truly significant and critical in our ability to switch to remote working so fluidly when the pandemic hit. But that wasn't the intention. It was an investment focussed entirely on collaborative working, an enhanced method of communication and a way to ensure our clients receive the very best service when instructing The 36 Group.

Through all of our developments, The 36 Group have taken the view that it is important to make the transition and adoption of these changes as organic as possible. Rather than forcing people to change or waiting until a change is urgent, I believe that showing people why a different way of working may be better, and giving true to life examples of how it can assist, is how we have achieved fairly painless transitions in working practices and new technology.

Moving into 2021, the legal tech landscape is evolving fast but I know we are ready. And if we are not, our approach will see us through.

In my next article, I'll be discussing some of the day-to-day tools that have helped us to improve productivity in small but critical ways, including project software and email management. For now, I'd really like to invite you to share with me your productivity stories – whether that be from lockdown or before. What have you found critical to your home working set up? And what company changes have surprised or impressed you? Of course, not all of it is positive, so if you feel comfortable, share your challenges too. It's a learning curve for us all…

These changes were truly significant and critical in our ability to switch to remote working so fluidly when the pandemic hit.