DIGITAL DEALING

Tackling internal resistance will be key to making the paper-light office a reality. Chris Boulter at Thomson Reuters UK and Ireland outlines the routes to digital change

It should be fairly obvious that working with paper has the potential to be ridiculously inefficient compared to the digital alternatives that are now available. Using a straightforward online search you can be fairly confident of finding any piece of information in a few clicks. Drop a massive bundle of papers from a not especially great height – and good luck finding your place again the same morning.

If you ever get those pages back in the right order, it's also expensive to keep them to refer back to – just as inefficiently – in future.

"As a rule of thumb, office space is a law firm's second biggest expense," says Chris Boulter, head of workflow at Thomson Reuters, Legal UK and Ireland. "So why would firms spend that on space for filing cabinets and storage space if they could possibly avoid it?"

Even less space is needed if people work from a wider range of locations. "Firms are moving to models of more flexible working. Some may have much smaller office spaces for meetings, but where the lawyers are free to work easily elsewhere – from home or on the move," says Boulter. "How many people does an office really need to support if client documents and systems can now be accessed anywhere?"

And if you don't move on from paper to process, where do you store that paper if you're working from multiple locations – offices or otherwise?

"Paper can easily be lost, misplaced, or incorrectly filed," says Boulter. "Digitised documents are much more efficient in a whole host of ways."

Any way in which paper does prove inefficient can, of course, also impact the client's view of a business's service – especially when people are accustomed to ever-faster online experiences in virtually every walk of life.

"We know consumers will locate, buy, pay for and receive things online, wherever they happen to be, physically," says Boulter. "There's an expectation that's how modern law firms should operate too.

"Small businesses will also, rightly, question why they're paying for a stream of paper communications."

Perhaps one reason that a 'paperless' office is so daunting for small firms, however – in spite of obvious efficiency advantages, is because there's a fear it will be precisely that – the promise of a zero-paper policy. But whether there's an outright ban or not, Boulter says businesses certainly shouldn't embark on digital migration half-heartedly. "You can't part-digitise records. You'll just be looking for things in two places, which defeats the whole purpose."

The challenge there, in turn, is tackling internal resistance to compulsory change. Ask people politely to think twice before printing that page, and they might consider it. Tell them there'll be no stack of paper in the cupboard at all, and you may have a problem.

"Process adoption usually embeds itself best if driven by a powerful internal champion with real metrics at hand to make the business case," says Boulter. "It takes even more of a concerted effort to get a clear understanding of the opportunity cost of time lost."

CLOUD JUDGEMENT

So, as generally smart, typically tech-savvy people, why on earth would law firms not lean on the available IT to deliver both improved process efficiency and savings on the bottom line?

They need to learn to appreciate the longer-term benefits of certain upfront costs that grate, explains Boulter. "There isn't just the cost of purchasing any new system, but the cost of regularly maintaining and updating it."

That's particularly hard on smaller law firms of course – with much smaller budgets. And that's the thinking behind Thomson Reuters' new cloud-based solution, Firm Central, which is scheduled for release later this year.

"A move to cloud means all the updating is done for you. You don't need your IT manager to install things. You might not even have an IT manager. You can have a system for smaller firms equivalent to what's out there for larger firms, but without the overheads.

"A commonly voiced concern with cloud is security of storage – but it's important to

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"Migrating every matter back to a certain point in time clearly involves a lot of scanning, but you could initially confine yourself to live matters and then go back to archive files one at a time as needed."

DOCUMENTING FUTURE

That said, the faster you get on with it the better – as the advantages don't end with a digital version of a paper record. As IT evolves, Boulter says there'll be even more opportunities for greater workflow efficiency through connecting different types of digital documents' data in new and exciting ways.

"Firm Central will use the very same search technologies as our company's core content products, such as Practical Law," says Boulter. "That means users will simultaneously be able to search across all their emails and pdfs, as well as any other materials related to any matter.

"We can also create new relationships between customer content and our own. For example, customers will be able to see what's in an uploaded document quickly – such as citations and appraisal references – and provide flags when changes to case law, legislation or best practice affect the contents. We can even begin to link our own taxonomies to those of our clients. If a firm starts a specific type of matter, we could proactively recommend documents they might need, such as an automated template.

"Firms will be able to share more data automatically between all manner of applications and services. Customer contact details can link directly to tools such as our FastDraft service.

"Connections like this means it won't just be a case of making a difference to the efficiency of how documents are stored. Technology will also help firms to deliver legal tasks more efficiently. That's where content digitisation offers true competitive advantage.

"Thomson Reuters has been on a long journey of digitisation over the past 20 years. We're now seeing our customers going on that same journey, and we're well positioned to appreciate what they need to make it a success." LPM

distinguish between third-party public cloud with servers dotted around the globe and a private-hosted solution in the UK. Here at Thomson Reuters the same data centres we're offering to firms support our own content business."

There's also the question of relative risk to consider. "People are starting to appreciate they can have data stored in a secure hosted environment that might otherwise be sitting in an office cupboard," says Boulter. That argument could also apply to an on-premise server or reams of paper, but which of the three is least risky?

Smaller firms may also express concern at the likely cost of the transition to digital. But, says Boulter, although they need to see the project through fully, everything doesn't necessarily have to happen at once.