

# Shifting habits



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for example, a good paralegal can be very useful for taking on the more mundane and repetitive elements of a case, leaving the more qualified person to concentrate on being a lawyer.

“This will reduce costs for the client and help the firm be more competitive. Keeping an eye on how each matter costs through monitoring time recording can be a valuable exercise and assist with calculating profit.”

Karen Holden, founder and CEO at A City Law Firm, says: “Many traditional firms are seeing real issues owing to competition, costs and technology but I think firms that are adaptable and innovative will thrive more easily in this changing landscape.”

And despite results from LPM Legal IT landscapes report over the years, where SME law firms list bigger firms as their biggest competitor, Holden adds that large firms cannot make changes and decisions quickly – they’re slow to adapt to the ever-changing legal landscape.

That being said, Collier points out that SME firms have fewer resources to hand than their larger competitors and sometimes SMEs misunderstand the benefits support staff can bring to the table.

“If there isn’t the resource to manage a particular project, be that a new marketing campaign or even a finance initiative, the SME firms will struggle to improve and make the necessary changes in order to survive.

“And firms must keep up with what the regulatory bodies are regularly insisting we all abide by – having the time to observe the modifications being placed upon us is no mean feat; underestimate the time it takes to implement new procedures and rules at your peril – unfortunately they are a necessary evil.”

## CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

Catherine Wahlberg, managing director at Alsters Kelley, agrees that the key to overcoming the challenges to come will be how individual firms respond to those difficulties. “Business models within the legal sector have changed to be more responsive. Adapting to differing environments, challenges and demands is critical.”

Alsters Kelley has learned to be agile. “The last recession was financially tough, but it was also the catalyst for significant change and that in itself is a positive outcome. We got hit pretty hard in 2008 and the impact was serious but we gained a new skillset, too.

“The whole notion of having a three-year or five-year plan is nice but it’s very broad. You’ve got to be prepared to change very quickly behind the scenes. It’s okay to change your mind or your direction – you have to do that sometimes. Being

It’s interesting to see that around a third of firms say a millennial will potentially be running things within the next five years – so clearly, we have the talent and the confidence moving through the legal ranks.

However, over the last few years, there has been more noise and increasing pressure around the recruitment of ‘good-quality people’ and it seems that, for the foreseeable future, this will continue. Perhaps we should stop to consider a factor that isn’t helping this problem, which is the pressure being applied by clients to drive down costs. Is this preventing firms from taking the investment of time to adequately train and nurture more junior members of staff and grow more talented people? We all know that when we’re under pressure it’s easier to do the job yourself than it is to ask someone else, but perhaps it’s now time to consider more inward investment and relinquish a little off the bottom line.

That said, with a little foresight and creativity some of the simpler admin tasks in the firm can now be automated to great effect and help to pull back some of that lost margin – fewer mistakes, much faster, saving time. Once seen as a hurdle, technology is now very much a hygiene factor in most law firms and, moving forward, may start to help bridge the gap for finding high-quality staff with the growing skillsets of AI and its applications.

For the sceptics out there, we only need to look at the shift in workplace habits. It wasn’t long ago that flexible homeworking barely existed, and yet now it’s frowned upon for an employer not to at least consider it. The main reason is obvious – can someone be trusted to work when they’re out of sight?

Well again, this shouldn’t be a barrier, with the gainful help of technology it’s now possible to manage some of this doubt and uncertainty through remote login, scheduled videoconferencing and remote centralised filing systems. The notion of there being a lack of quality people in the market may be promoted by the demand for office-based working.

Clearly, there are many threats to a law firms’ existence but surely the key to growth and future prosperity lies within the people behind the firm and the knowledge they each bring. People are our ‘point of difference’ and surely, with the right guidance, support, technology and tuition, we can all help to fill the so-called gap in the ‘quest for quality people’. **LPM**

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