

Case Study: Osborne Clarke

Company: Osborne Clarke
Industry: Legal
Product: LexisNexis® InterAction®

London-based Osborne Clarke, a 400-lawyer firm, has been raising eyebrows among the larger, Magic Circle firms with a spate of high-profile awards. Its most recent achievements include being named “Most Enterprising Law Firm of the Year” by Legal Business Magazine (2000), “Management Team of the Year” by The Lawyer Magazine (2001), and finalists for “European Technology Law Firm of the Year” by the European Technology Forum 2000.

The recent transformation of the legal industry from cottage practice to big business is not limited to the large, elite law firms. Increasingly, mid-size practices, long believed to trail behind their larger counterparts in terms of sophistication and business acumen, have come into their own. Osborne Clarke is a case in point, and the firm’s success cannot be attributed to chance. Indeed their international expansion, tenacious focus on dominating certain key strategic practice areas (technology, telecommunications and financial services), and impressive investment in infrastructure are the result of a well-conceived business plan and determined execution of that plan. The result? Phenomenal growth - over forty percent this year alone.

Walking the Talk

Osborne Clarke understands that implementing a world-class IT system is critical to the long-term success of the firm. As Nicola Webb, the firm’s E-Business Director, puts it, “investing

in best of breed systems is essential in order to show business clients Osborne Clarke’s understanding of sound business practices. It is, as they say, all about ‘walking the talk’. If we’re going to be leaders in supplying legal services to the technology and telecommunications sectors, then we must walk the talk by being leading users of technology ourselves.”

This “Walking the Talk” approach was applied most recently to the firm’s growing client relationship data problem. Paul Askew, one of Osborne Clarke’s IT Project Managers, recalls that burgeoning amounts of client information were overwhelming the firm’s legacy systems. “People were capturing data in a variety of formats - whether it be their Microsoft Outlook contacts databases or in their offline diaries. Their PA’s (Personal Assistants) were also accumulating contacts.”

Webb says that the firm’s business development database, provided by their practice management vendor, was contributing to the disarray of the firm’s client information. “In my view, the original product was never designed to be rolled out widely across all lawyers and staff. It wasn’t user-friendly enough and was quite complicated to use. It was designed primarily as a tool for the marketing department and wasn’t meant to scale much past 20 or so users.”

The business risks of maintaining their current client relationship management system were untenable. According to Webb, in some instances the costs to the firm were simple embarrassment, in others, lost opportunity. “For instance, we’ve had situations where people from different offices were pitching the same client for new business – only they didn’t know it. There were also one or two instances in which we’d call upon a client to cross-sell additional services, only to discover that we were providing those services to the client already - but from a different office.”

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Nicola Webb, e-business Director, Osborne Clarke



Enterprise Solutions

Investing in the Client Relationship

Osborne Clarke undertook a software search to find a replacement system. According to Askew, they had no difficulty in identifying the best of breed solution. "We looked at the marketplace and realised that LexisNexis® InterAction® (formerly Interface Software) was our only option. It's outstanding in the legal arena."

Askew cited four key considerations that weighed heavily in their assessment. "First, given our rapid growth, scalability was important to us. Arriving at a single instance of a contact in the database also was crucial. We liked InterAction's ability to guard against duplicate records. In addition, the system's ability to manage relationships was unrivalled. And finally, InterAction's leading position in the marketplace was persuasive. It's already been selected by many of the top law firms in the UK."

Webb recalls that after it became clear their existing system was not serving Osborne Clarke's objectives, the business case for InterAction was persuasive. "We were missing so many opportunities. We knew that if we couldn't share our knowledge about clients and contacts effectively using technology, then this knowledge could not be harnessed to meet our business development goals."

The firm has recently rolled out InterAction to a pilot group of users. Currently about 35 lawyers and their PA's in the London office have access to the system, as does the business development department. Askew says that they have established a division of responsibility between the lawyers and PA's that works quite effectively. "The PA's manage the information and update it in InterAction. They love it. This frees up the lawyers to access the system and search on the contact. They can see what's happened recently and respond accordingly."

Even at these very early stages in the implementation, Webb reports significant results. "Previously, when a lawyer went out to pitch a prospective client, that information could not be easily spread throughout the firm. At best, if the lawyer was junior, he would involve a partner. For best practices purposes, we are now encouraging lawyers to write post-visit reports, which are disseminated via the system."

Webb says InterAction has proven to be an ideal tool for sharing this important information. "In one instance, a lawyer visited a venture capital firm and dutifully noted his activities in the visit report, which included notes about a company that the venture capital firm was considering investing in. The lawyer's PA added the report to the system. Later that week, another lawyer within Osborne Clarke saw the report on InterAction, and realised that he had information about this company that might be valuable to the venture capital client. These two lawyers talked and went back to the venture capital firm with this information. As a result, we were instructed on the investment and were awarded fees of around £50,000. We might not have won this business without InterAction. I would consider this to be a significant return on investment already from the system."

Ensuring Success in Good Economic Times and Bad

In good economic times, resources are plentiful to invest in enterprise systems like CRM software. However, in down times, some might question whether a CRM system is the most appropriate use of a firm's resources. Webb states emphatically that making such an investment is especially critical if business is slow. "Although we're not experiencing slow down yet, there is talk of it in the UK. And that's exactly when you should increase your investment in these types of projects. You stand to pick up a greater percentage of the more limited work that's around."

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Firms need to be winning market share from their competitors to win new clients in bad times and, more importantly, they need to be maximising their client relationships, to tie clients as closely to them as possible. And then when the good times come around again, you are hopefully in a stronger position than your competitors.”

Emboldened by the success of the pilot program, Askew is now looking forward to their firmwide rollout of InterAction, and future integration plans. “It’s critical that the data is held in one record, and it’s always the correct record. We will soon be integrating information from Microsoft Outlook, our iManage document management system and our practice management system. Once in InterAction, this will make it much easier for us to manage data and minimise duplicates in the system. Everything will be InterAction-based. The product’s two-way integration is a real bonus.”

Askew also anticipates that InterAction will be a critical component of the firm’s knowledge management strategy. “We are hoping to implement an internal portal fairly shortly. Accessing contacts and relationship information via a portal is absolutely key to our strategy moving forward. InterAction will play a central role in this project.”

Askew says that he would not be able to move forward with these plans if InterAction had not provided such a solid technology foundation. “InterAction is a very well-thought-through product. The developments that I’ve seen so far have been excellent. We made the right decision in choosing it. It fits well into our strategy as a firm. It’s perfect for what we require.”



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