

## INDUSTRY CASE STUDY

# Profits in process

A Wright Hassall lawyer's new life of business process management is easier with Visualfiles from LexisNexis – and it helps if you really stress that, says IT director Martyn Wells

Leamy Leamington Spa's Wright Hassall is a firm on a mission. Full-year results for 2015 showed a 12% rise in pre-tax profits, up to £3.7m, with revenues hitting £17.6m. But aside from sticking with its spacious long-term Midlands base, the intention is not to stay put. Revenue shot up 64% in three years, and the firm is committed to breaking through the £20m floor of the top 100.

HQ has plenty of room to accommodate new talent to take it there. New managing partner Sarah Perry also recently pointed to several high-priority sectors for the rest of the year, including advanced manufacturing and gaming entertainment (a local cluster of businesses is known as 'Silicon Spa'). And in July the firm hired its first sales director – from Shakespeare Martineau – citing excitement at “an aggressive growth strategy for the next 10 years” and hinting at the potential of global brands investing in the UK from China and India.

IT director Martyn Wells came onboard from a financial services background around three years ago. “I was told by the managing committee at the time that we wanted to be a top 100 firm and principal supplier to the region, but also with a true national reputation,” he says. The number of staff has grown alongside revenues, from 208 to near 300, in that time – and the grand plan remains on track. “There has been no merger,” Wells adds. “Everything has happened through strategic lateral hiring and intense focus on sector opportunities.”

## Mounting production

But management knows that any vision for an ambitious 2016 firm must be underpinned by equally strategic use of technology. Moving into new sectors, for example, will place more pressure

on the firm's pipeline management. As the firm grows more successful, it will be harder to keep the right rhythm of workflows, achieve consistent cashflow and avoid bottlenecks. A frenzy of billing at the back end can't be at the expense of business development activity upfront, says Wells.

So when Wright Hassall needed a new case management solution, Wells decided to ramp up the firm's relationship with LexisNexis in the area. The case and matter management system Visualfiles was already in use by some pockets of staff – and that could be the basis for driving a firm-wide move to improved productivity by embracing business process management, he says.

The fundamental principle is to break any process down into key fee earner actions, which then become measurable milestones. “A good example is a basic will,” says Wells. “There's the client introduction, the requirements, a first draft, a second draft and issuing the bill. Clearly, it helps to know when the current status within a process changes.”

But that's most useful, he says, when you scale it up across all the lawyers following a process to get a clear picture of the practice's overall pipeline. “We're now in the process of teaching team leaders to use this





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implementation to view and track their team’s workload, including its carrying WIP value and disbursements.” The next phase is to train them to use that data – alongside resources and overheads – to analyse work profitability, he explains.

“There’s a lot of pressure to move to fixed fee and other alternative pricing models. We’ve trained our fee earners in pricing over the past year, and Visualfiles gives them the tools and the data to make some more informed decisions.

**Easy street**

Wells started the firm down this path with the will-writing process, he says, because it was the simplest for anyone to understand. But the aim is to achieve such management discipline regardless of the number of precedents involved, and even with complex pieces of litigation.

“As it will be mandatory, we need to manage the fact some people could see it as a bit of an imposition,” he admits. “We need them engaged, but possibly also to distract them from what’s changing on the day-to-day level.

“The best way to manage that is a bit of fun.”

When a new phone system complete with instant messaging was installed, the IT department changed everybody’s desktops to the same bright orange brand colour. People weren’t necessarily impressed, says Wells, but they were quite intrigued – and along with some informal demonstration, the word spread. The ‘orange’ theme continued. “It’s really about internal marketing,” he says.

There was a similar exercise when lawyers needed to learn to love speech recognition with their digital dictation – their device came with a friendly cupcake.

So what about engagement with business process management? “We decided to emphasise how ‘easy’ it was,” says Wells. Posters picked up the theme (in toilet cubicles, no less), screens were altered to cartoons of song titles that use the word – and a postcard competition offered a prize.

It’s a big red button for your desk. And when you push it, a voice sonorously – if humorously – declares how very “easy” it was to do so.

“Engagement was through the roof. Everyone wanted one,” laughs Wells.

If only every firm process was that simple. ▀