


 INDUSTRY INTERVIEW

Solve the profitability problem

Business challenges come in as many shapes and sizes as there are firms to face them, and the pandemic has, of course, presented new ones. But innovation resources are finite. It's sensible to think big at first, says Simon Farthing at LexisNexis Enterprise Solutions

Innovation usually involves taking at least some risk. Will your new business idea or process work? And will it stick? Achieving return on investment – money and time – will depend on both. Law firms clearly need to remain as open as possible to alternatives as they navigate the challenges in our dramatically changed business landscape, but may find their risk appetites have also altered somewhat.

Simon Farthing, commercial and marketing director at LexisNexis Enterprise Solutions, says: “It depends on where any given firm already sits in terms of strategy, but business justification is one thing that’s articulated a lot more strongly at the moment. A project needs to be for the right reasons – a specific problem needing a solution, without which you can expect a particular business impact.”

It then becomes a question of priority, and although it wouldn’t be advisable to take on too much at once, Farthing also cautions against the school of thought that you should “start with

something simple” and work your way up.

“Start with a small project or team, by all means – but work on the hardest problem you can find. Then you can become a beacon for the rest of the firm, and cast around for other challenges to solve.”

The extent to which different groups are connected in the effort can also affect success. Farthing continues: “There are some great examples of problem-focused collaboration out there. However, sometimes a technology team may already have ticked a lot of boxes from their perspective, and lawyers are only introduced later. Then the lawyers either don’t see the same problem, or experience the solution as just another system they have to use. Simply presenting new technology as solving a problem can itself present a problem, and you can’t change anything without the involvement of people.

“Conversely, you can reach a place where lawyers not only want to adopt the solution to their problems, but they also want others to adopt it

because it was their own idea! That's a winning place to be."

Team transformations

What problems has Farthing witnessed law firms tackling as priorities since the first lockdowns? One concerns effective communication for far-flung teams. Although most were quick to roll out one or more remote meeting and collaboration platforms such as Microsoft Teams, the challenge has since shifted onto ensuring people are truly engaged with their teams and workloads using such tools. "Is the ability to see people really solving the problem?" asks Farthing. "Do I simply expect my team to focus and nod intently as I run through lots of metrics on a screen, or is there another way?"

"Using functionality for task supervision, for example, we can get early indicators of where process pinch-points or other problems may be arising, and begin useful conversations about capacity and legal project management." In larger international firms, workload could even be redistributed across borders rather than being confined to just the one fiscal location, he says.

Or, what if a relatively bespoke area of practice suddenly finds itself with fewer hands needing to complete the same work – whether shorter-term through furloughing, or the result of redundancies? How does the firm ensure it maintains the same quality, efficiency and profitability?

"Then along comes an opportunity to win some great new business, but the lighter team can't easily be ramped up to accommodate it – and, in any case, the team isn't the same team." An automation intervention that has already borne fruit in a more transactional area could potentially be partially mapped across to this more complex one.

Finding fresh ways to work

In November 2020, LexisNexis unveiled the new Lexis Omni platform, which – as the name suggests – delivers several aspects of legal-process efficiency within which firms might identify their big problem. It encompasses workflow automation, business process optimisation, document production, collaboration, best-of-breed integration, records management, work prioritisation and powerful data reporting, all powered by an evolution of the Lexis Core automation engine that successfully powers the Lexis Visualfiles system.

"Lawyers today can have so much on their

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desktop or smartphone, they risk becoming lost in a forest of intended efficiency," says Farthing, once a practising lawyer himself. So, among other challenges, Lexis Omni has sought to address how an increasing range of tooling is most productively consumed by people. "LexisNexis has built a great reputation for providing very powerful desktop tools. But people are now working very different patterns for different reasons, so it can make more sense to detach from the desktop for certain tasks, or at certain times, when work is more intuitive another way. What software does for you shouldn't be contingent on the way you access it."

As an example, he suggests, a lawyer might opt to flick through some clause exceptions and automate a document on their tablet or phone rather than at the laptop they're sitting facing for most of the day. Technology should enable that sort of decision rather than frustrate it with too many hoops.

Another good example of process flexibility, meanwhile, is bringing automation to bear on the work journeys of lawyers with different levels of experience. Many firms have been wrestling with managing remote supervision and mentoring in lockdowns – not only from the perspective of compliance, but also ensuring continuous learning and development as lawyers progress their careers at home. "With direct supervision in the office, younger lawyers have traditionally been able to take on more advanced work," says Farthing. Without proximity for a quick check-in on progress, however, it's harder to justify that. But Lexis Omni allows firms to programme in escalation points, he says. "When a transaction reaches a point where the lawyer needs more senior feedback on a document, the system can trigger an automatic notification for that to happen.

"You can also set up some safeguards to guide users – pop-up alerts, for example, linking to a precedent or knowledge source for a particular stage of the process – whereas a more experienced lawyer can complete exactly the same task but with more autonomy to control it."

Working remotely or otherwise, firms still need their lawyers to absorb and process knowledge from others more generally, of course – and if that's a problem for your firm, it certainly sounds like a sizeable candidate for the innovation lab in 2021. ▀