

MISSION CRITICAL IT

Making Business Thrive

INTERVIEW WITH
CHRIS SETFORD
and GUY SETFORD
CO-CHIEF EXECUTIVES
SETFORDS SOLICITORS

Commissioned by:



Introduction

Interestingly, Bill Gates once said that “the advance of technology is based on making it fit in, so that you don’t really even notice because it has become part of everyday life.”

Interestingly, because within a timescale which is unprecedented in business, IT has moved from supporting function to in effect, controlling function. So what could the influence of IT be, say, five years down the line?

This is one of the interviews for a book commissioned by Tailor Made Technologies and to be published by DECISION magazine, in which businesses which are really focused on the relationships with their staff and customers, share what they consider to be the issues they have to get right in terms of IT.

Knowing where to make a start

“The trick with building a successful business is to regularly ask yourself ‘how do we do better tomorrow than we did today’.”

And for that to happen in the legal profession, firms are going to have to look at IT a little differently. That’s according to Guy Setford, co-chief executive of Setfords Solicitors, set up in 2006, and now with 400 consultant self-employed lawyers and a £40million turnover.

“The priority for many firms has been investing to drive internal efficiencies, not investing in technology for the client benefit,” he observes. “Usually the starting point is opening the file more efficiently but that isn’t the beginning, or at least it shouldn’t be. Really it’s the first contact you have with the client or they have with you – the minute someone makes contact for the first time. That’s the point where technology has to be deployed to make the client journey as smooth as possible.

“The first item on the agenda when you are considering new IT is whether it will help you deliver better service. It should be people first, not process – what do clients and lawyers need



Guy and Chris Setford

and how can we improve delivery of our service to meet those requirements. In that order.” The efficacy of that approach? Setfords point to a 4.8 Trustpilot rating from over 7000 reviews. Some 60% of their work is b2c, with Setfords ranked in the top five of conveyancing firms in the country.

“It’s about getting the balance right,” Guy Setford continues. “Professional services aren’t the same as buying something on Amazon where you probably don’t want to speak to anyone.

But at some point the lawyer and client always need to talk and technology should simplify everything to make that happen, not force the client to self serve.”

But in this commodified, price-driven age? “If we’re talking about sustainability, I can’t see how prices can go lower,” muses co-chief executive (and cousin) Chris Setford. “It’s possible now to find a conveyor belt conveyancing firm prepared to get it done for £300, but I think most people are sensible enough to know that’s not going to cover every eventuality. Common sense will come into play. The whole purpose of a professional service provider investing in IT isn’t to automate everything, because that is not what the client wants.”

Lawyers wishing to join Setfords have to go through a business planning process because the likelihood is they will be leaving the financial security of a salaried position, although if they have a client following, that makes the move easier.

“All of our consultant lawyers are self-employed and work to their own targets, not ours,” explains Chris Setford, “and they can spend all their time on client work rather than having to do the admin. They make the assumption that we have the required technology platform in place. For the client it means an experienced lawyer is not handing work down to a junior.

“And it’s a big attraction for lawyers to be in control of their own destiny, to have the freedom to be able to watch their kids at the school sports day.”



The actual modus operandi, made possible by technology, is that every document is received by Setfords where an industrial scale scanner (complete with conveyor belt) uploads them in the cloud for the appropriate lawyer to view. Before the investment in the new scanner it would have taken a team of six an entire day to put all the documents through. Now three people complete everything in two hours, and with machine learning the system recognises where to place each document.

“We notify the solicitor when something has been prepared for the client and after they authorise it, we can upload it for them to dispatch it,” Chris Setford explains. “So if a lawyer’s IT knowledge starts and ends with knowing how to turn their computer on, as long as they have a broadband connection we can take care of it all.

“In terms of security, none of our consulting lawyers can authorise money out of the business. That’s controlled by our completion payments team of qualified lawyers.”

According to Chris Setford, there is huge demand for integrated technology, but he asks: “Who really produces it end to end? It’s all so incredibly fragmented. Case management, accounting

integration, dictation, docusign, legal libraries – there are different platforms and software all over the place without adequate integration. I could keep adding to the list for the next half an hour, but the point I am making is that keeping on top of it all is a drain on resources.

“Law firms can get a bad rap for failing to move with the times, but the simple fact is the complexity they have to address with IT is enormous.

“There is a gulf between where we are and where we want to be, although yes, if it wasn’t for the technology which is available, then we wouldn’t be here. The point I am making is that while there is brilliant stuff out there, it’s all about bolting things on rather than the fully integrated platform which will take us to where clients want a law firm to be.


“If nobody innovates an end to end solution, then we have to look at an application program interface so that software can talk to each other, but usually APIs aren’t sophisticated enough or there is too much of a risk, and it is a relatively expensive route to take. What we need are legal tech providers which have built relationships with different software providers so they can produce a platform on which everything sits and works together seamlessly.”

“One of the biggest risks,” adds Guy Setford, “is buying software on the basis that it is plug and play and assuming it will fulfil all your requirements. You need to look further down the lens.”

Setfords is rated **Excellent**

Based on 7,151 reviews



 Trustpilot

“And when law firms merge,” Chris Setford points out, “it isn’t just about bringing two cultures together – integrating technology is fraught with problems. Tucked in the middle of all this is the problem of old legacy systems. Often the original vendors have been bought up by other players in order to inherit their customers, but little or no development has been taking place subsequently because the intention is to shift legacy users to cloud based software as a service.

“I’m not sure whether this is the same for all business sectors, but while we invest in decent systems and integrate everything as far as we can, there can be IT shortcomings at the other end which can cause delays. Nobody wants to wait while the little coloured wheel goes round and round on the screen, but we can only control what we can control.”

And service delivery is absolutely in the provider’s court,” asserts Guy Setford. “If their first contact is digital, a potential client will want instant access to information,” he says, “so there

needs to be an online calculator for them to obtain an instant conveyancing quote for example, and a chat bot facility, not just email or a phone number.

“The service provider needs people to sit behind that chatbot and not just rely on automation. Law firms have got to keep in mind that for the client, this is often going to be something of a distressed purchase.”

“Client facing means no matter how great your website appears on a desktop monitor, how does it look on a smartphone screen which is where most people will be accessing you from.

“It’s important to be able to use heat maps and other tools on your website to improve the use journey. Which parts of it aren’t quite right? It takes investment and constant refinement, but the winners will be those who recognise that.”

The immediate priority? “Data-led insight to drive more informed decision-making,” says Guy Setford emphatically, “which is why we have appointed a chief data officer.”

www.setfords.co.uk

About Tailor Made Technologies

Since 1994 Tailor Made Technologies have been delivering professional IT, communications, cloud, and cyber security solutions for businesses, education and public sector organisations across the UK. Through their 28-year track record TMT have been ranked 6th best managed service provider in EMEA and 2nd in the UK, as well as being featured on The Sunday Times Fast Track list for a decade.

Accreditations include ISO 9001, ISO 27001, Investors in People, with TMT's 105 engineers looking after 2200 customers and 11,000 managed devices, meeting 96% of service level agreements.

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About DECISION magazine

First published in 1988, DECISION magazine reflects the business lifestyle, the trials and tribulations, the hopes and aspirations of directors and managing partners responsible for businesses with a turnover of £3million and above in the south of England and London.

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