



IT competency in lawyers: A sticking point

Lawyers have been accused of spending too much time undertaking basic IT tasks and not enough time lawyering, says **Damian Blackburn**

In recent years, lawyers have seen a huge amount of changes to their profession, from the Legal Services Act to the Jackson Review. The resulting competitive forces, additional pressures and the natural forces of recession have not made for an easy ride for legal professionals. And, just when you thought there was light at the end of the tunnel, the general counsel of Kia Motors, Casey Flaherty, pops up to explain that levels of IT literacy in the legal world are far too low. This came from a series of tests administered to firms that KIA instructs, showing almost frighteningly low levels of IT skills.

This might not be a Richter scale shake-up for many of you, but it comes with a payload that needs to be taken seriously. The criticism of the legal world's take-up of technology skills didn't end there. Flaherty also took a dim view of the lack of investment in workflow and document automation.

All in all, the notion is that lawyers spend far too much time undertaking basic IT tasks and not enough time lawyering. If you consider how much technology is embedded in the daily routine of legal professionals, a casual observer could be forgiven for thinking

that their inherent skills sets would be much higher than they actually are.

Certainly Flaherty thinks so - his IT competency test for lawyers has resulted in firms falling short of the mark and subsequently resulted in their billing rates being reduced. Some might think this a little over the top, but to me it's an inevitable consequence of law firms failing to educate their fee earners in much other than fee earning.

Of course, that is the principal reason that fee-earners exist, but ignoring the peripheral skills required is now costing firms money. Is this unreasonable? I don't think so personally. Architects use computer-aided design packages to very high levels in order to deliver results. Legal professionals should take a similar view; that there is a minimum level of IT competency that they should underpin their work with, and that level is currently much higher than the incumbent level for most.

IT literacy

The timing is right for Flaherty to administer his views on the subject, as the general squeeze on law firms has resulted in cuts in support services and a more competitive marketplace: a perfect time for a sizeable client

to apply pressure on an important but thus far-overlooked point.

The current improving climate might persuade law firms to think that the IT competency issue is just a passing fancy, but a number of general counsel are adopting, or looking to adopt, the Kia Motors test as part of their scrutiny of law firms.

Widespread adoption is likely to make for a more competitive, or tougher marketplace, and the possibility of using the results to beat down fees is something that all firms should pay attention to.

My own recollection of running education programmes in legal environments is that support staff are far more likely to turn up to training than legal staff. It was a perennial problem that had little or no sanction to encourage users into the training room, and explanations of the benefits fell on deaf ears.

Assuming it takes hold, the new regime could provide firms' administrators with both the sanction and the rationale, so it will be interesting to see if it results in a change of skill levels. Recessions and cutbacks tend to affect IT training staff almost before any other in a law firm, but it is encouraging to note that there are a few vacancies



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now being advertised. Of course, it is not all doom and gloom. In all of this there are opportunities for firms to improve IT competency and thus add a degree of competitive edge when they are bidding for work or applying for a panel place.

Next month I will be looking at how firms can adapt to the imposition of improved IT competency. **SJ**



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