



The dream of running a law firm on free software

As law firms try to find ways of cutting their IT spend, **Damian Blackburn** analyses the cost of effective technology

Is it possible to run a law firm using only the free software available online, asked somebody on LinkedIn recently. The question may have been driven by the feeling that in recent years we have seen law firms try to cut technology spend, and that we have seen mainstream technology get gradually cheaper, to the point where some of it is now free.

The technology world has long enjoyed free products, but these were always non-mainstream small applications aimed at filling holes in existing systems, usually generated by the more enthusiastic and skilful members of the IT community.

Software appetite

Early email systems such as Hotmail became prolific because they offered free email to everyone, but of course you had to have @hotmail.com as the domain. That was no use to business, but Google then pitched in with a free email and applications package for businesses with up to 10 users. They have sadly discontinued the service, but it clearly gave users an appetite for free software and encouraged them to understand that firms don't need a server based solution if they are not that big. To a certain extent, it also helped users get over their fear of cloud based systems.

Google, with their enormous coffers could offer the service for free, knowing that many users would upgrade it to a paid



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service if they grew (email systems don't often get moved to different platforms), and partly to get millions of users in before asking for a fee when it was unlikely that users would refuse, only to then have to go through the rigmarole of changing systems.

So the question remains, can you run a business on free technology? You can certainly get free hardware if you are prepared to accept older equipment, and don't mind trawling the likes of Freecycle for it. Plus, if you are going to be using cloud-based services you really don't need too much processing power or storage on the machinery. You can also link machines with rudimentary networking built into Microsoft Windows, enabling the sharing of information, printers etc.

When it comes to software, you can obtain packages such as OpenOffice, which provide the equivalent to Microsoft products, completely free of any licence cost. If you search hard enough you can also find free tools for time recording and basic accounts, or you can fashion spreadsheets to perform these tasks, but beyond those facilities it starts to become a bit of a struggle. In addition, one thing that is generally not supported by free products is the ability to share them with your colleagues, assuming you are not a one-person firm.

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Smart investments

Spending acres of your time trying to make free things work in a business fashion is not easy to justify. If you look at the average charge rate for your time, how much money are you losing by spending hours trying to do something that a few pounds worth of software will do for you – or for that matter a small amount of money on consultancy or support.

At a recent conference, the general counsel of Kia criticised lawyers for not being sufficiently IT literate, and thus taking too long to perform routine software tasks. This is likely to shake the industry a little, and the expectation is that lawyers will therefore

THE HARD-WIRING

- The availability of free software makes it tempting to try and reduce spend.
- Cloud services can lead to less or even no infrastructure beyond end user devices.
- Free products generally don't support multi user environments well.
- Unfamiliar interfaces of free products result in more time learning and using.
- Every hour spent trying to manipulate cheaper technology is an hour's lost billing.
- Law firms are more likely to be scrutinised on IT skills following comments made by Kia.

spend less time with technology, not more.

Bearing this in mind, you should always budget for effective technology. I don't advocate complex systems, and those leaving larger firms for smaller ones, or their own ventures, need to assess what does and does not make a difference in terms of technology. You can try and run your firm for free technology wise, but a small investment will more than handsomely pay you back. **SJ**



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