New analysis tools are making big data even more relevant

Legal technology may not have changed much recently, but how law firms use it, compared with their new rivals, will be the next big step, predicts **Damian Blackburn**

The great and the good of the world of legal IT descended on Hanbury Manor earlier this month to discuss the latest hot topics and technologies and share ideas. The event was the Legal IT Forum (LITF), an annual event for IT directors, partners, suppliers and consultants. It provides a range of interesting sessions to attend, and an opportunity to mingle with peers and bring oneself up to speed with the latest developments.

There is normally a theme, intended or otherwise to these type of gatherings. In past years hot topics have included cloud computing, the Legal Services Act, outsourcing and CRM systems. This year seems to be the year of business intelligence, mixed in with big data, and knowledge systems. This topic has been bubbling away for a while, and we have seen business intelligence and knowledge systems in law firms for some time now, but the change in landscape that big data has provided has re-established the relevance of them, with additional tools, concerns, and considerations coming to the fore.

Quantities of data

One recurring notion at the forum was that law firms already have vast quantities of data that they have generated over the years, and are not necessarily getting the best out of. While there have been analysis systems out there for some time, they didn't come with the power or flexibility of the latest batch of big data derived tools and techniques. The growth in this area is not limited to analysis of a firm's own data, but also that of other data sources such as social media, or bought in data sets, either in isolation or in conjunction with each other. The market for big data, and its associated technologies, is a new and constantly expanding one, and it is likely to dominate the world of legal IT for the foreseeable future.

Of course there is a regulatory framework to navigate in any substantive data project, and firms need to ensure that they put frameworks in place that ensure that regulatory compliance is a feature rather than an afterthought. It's very easy to forget this when looking at new and interesting data, so Simon Briskman, partner at Field Fisher, and I answered a range of questions on this, providing the audience with what I hope was a broader understanding of the issues.

Blackberry woes

There were of course other issues being discussed, and the current problems of Blackberry were fairly high on the agenda. Law firms were strong adopters of Blackberry technology, initially because it was first to market, but also due to its security, and its low running costs when data rates were extremely high. You may have noticed the latest Blackberry adverts in the papers, enticing you to reminisce about the first deal you closed on your Blackberry in the hope that sentimentality, if not the latest version 10 of their system, will keep your custom. No one really knows what will happen to them, but law firms are watching with interest, and some are moving to Apple and Windows platforms (although there does not seem to be too much support for Android phones). The rise of mobile device management, and the lowering of data rates has contributed enormously to that migration, but Blackberry's recent service issues, and current financial woes are doing little to persuade law firms to stick with them.

As ever, there were a group of legal IT software suppliers on hand to demonstrate their latest offerings. Many of the suppliers chipped in with, or led round table discussions which tends to take the edge off the sales oriented nature of their presence, and to be fair, they do also sponsor the bar.

To my eye, there has not been much in the way of game changing software in the legal market of late. What is interesting is not so much what technology firms are using, but how they are using it. New entrants to the legal market appear to be much more process oriented and many a discussion was had over a pint as to how firms need to react to that. No doubt the landscape will change in the intervening twelve months. **SJ**

TECH GRAPEVINE

Legal IT forums are still excellent places to meet peers, discuss the latest technologies and get inside information on systems and services, so here's what people were talking about at the Legal It Forum this year:

- Blackberry's woes are still high on many agendas;
- Big data, and related technologies, are growing both as a topic, and as a reality for law firms;
- Data analysis tools are improving, as is the availability of data itself, so firms should be able to produce more insightful information going forward;
- However, law firms are not exempt from the long arm of the regulator, so always proceed with the necessary amount of regulatory planning.

Damian Blackburn is former IT director at a top 100 law firm and now director of SLFtech
www.slftech.com