

SaaS for Lawyers – Routine Use of Hosted IT Services

By Allan Carton of Inpractice UK

Use of "Software as a Service" (SaaS) is already a routine part of most legal firms and has been for quite a few years now with the use of hosted applications that deliver information to lawyers. In the examples below, we show how much further this has moved, with law firms using a variety of software services via the Internet ranging from simple applications to the whole of their IT systems. Adoption of SaaS solutions should be explored by firms of all sizes as there are now different solutions that can fit the needs of firms of just about any size and focus, but there are "horses for courses".

Users are comfortable with SaaS. The new generation of employees entering the workforce have not only been raised on consumer services, such as iTunes and YouTube, but also live on social networking sites like FaceBook and MySpace. These experiences are shaping their expectations about how they leverage technology and interact with their peers. These applications are all "SaaS", even if much of it is free.

We see a steady move to use of hosted services in law firms, with the pace picking up as technologies and expertise on the part of hosting companies develop very quickly. Whereas the applications being used previously were related to just some aspects of handling legal work (conveyancing, searches, legal research), hosting of services has now moved much deeper into everyday management of the practice. The comprehensive and integrated solutions we see developing now are a logical extension of the more "standalone" SaaS services that have been in use for some time; either in IT management or in working as a lawyer.

Key components of any SaaS solution are:

- Use of software over the internet.
- "Pay-as-you-go" subscription licensing - on registration or a per user or transaction basis.
- Centralised update, development and support, with investment in high levels of expertise by the provider.
- Availability of extended (maybe 24/7) support for users by the provider
- Access to the services anywhere, anytime.
- Access to the system online by all interested parties

Those Early Moves

The seeds have already been sown in the legal sector. Early SaaS services gave lawyers access to online systems managed by e.g. Lexis Nexis Butterworths (www.lexisnexis.co.uk) and other legal publishers for legal research for a fee; then we had Land Registry Direct (www.landregistrydirect.co.uk), which continues to expand the range of services that lawyers can access on their system. Also, providers of property searches, such as Searchflow (www.searchflow.com), where case management systems are now often integrated, to feed information into online searches and then to place the information fed back into client files. The alternatives here are for lawyers to employ their own people to buy and manage the reference books or go out to do the searches. Online services continue to be more effective solutions here, where a third party does the work, providing access to their content to many other firms.

Moving On

One example of the radically improving technology that has just arrived is BT's recent launch of its revolutionary 21st Century Network (21CN) programme. A multi-billion pound infrastructure project that will create high bandwidth Ethernet networks nationwide to help customers simultaneously improve their business performance and save money. Until now Ethernet connectivity has been largely limited to selected urban areas, with coverage based on just 60 points of presence (POPs) in forty metropolitan areas. But the roll-out of 21CN will increase this number to 600 POPs, covering 87% of UK businesses, by April 2009; rising to 1100 POPs a year later providing the option of next generation Ethernet services to 98% of UK businesses.

So this kind of incredibly fast and reliable connectivity means that lawyers (like any other business) can now have some or all of their IT resources securely locked away in a data centre, cared for and nurtured in a safe environment and managed by a team of experts with highly secure connections to the Internet that a law firm could not otherwise afford to build for themselves – all accessible via the Internet from anywhere 24/7 with support on tap. When employees leave your firm, the costs reduce immediately; when they arrive, there is a known cost per user for each person added.

This is happening now with law firms. The question is not whether to use SaaS but which solutions to move, how and when - to create a more effective overall solution for the practice. Microsoft has recently forecast growth in takeup of subscription software at a compound rate of 30% per year during the next 3 years, considerably outpacing the traditional software market.

Just a few examples of that progression:

- **Hosted case management** applications are good examples that have been available for some time, from proven online providers like EasyConvey (www.easyconvey.com) and Ochresoft (www.ochresoft.com) in conveyancing. They have allowed a low cost entry level for firms that do not have a lot of technical IT expertise; allowing them to use a system managed by the provider at a cost per transaction which has made the solution affordable and manageable, but generally without any integration into the other parts of the practice. But users can work from anywhere and other parties can share the information as it's all accessible, subject to security on the web.
- **Simple application-driven solutions** that can be used as and when needed; many providing new low-cost tools to help develop your business. For example:
 - **Web conference calls and webinars** www.gotomeeting.com
 - **Online newsletters** with sophisticated feedback tools – www.enablermail.com
 - **Microsoft CRM systems** customised for law firms – www.crm4legal.com
- **Automated data backup and replication**; or on demand is now a common solution with a number of suppliers providing different options. Examples include Denton Wilde Sapte (www.dentonwildesapte.com) using services provided by InTechnology (www.intechnology.com);
- **Hosted practice management systems** are now being offered by a number of suppliers, with hosting provided either directly or through specialist business partners. Just a few examples of suppliers and firms that have already made the move include:

- SOS whose hosted users include JBS Solicitors (www.jbslaw.co.uk) and Towcester Family Law Practice (www.tflp.co.uk) They have recently teamed up with Intercept IT to offer a packaged SaaS solution.
- Pracctice were the first to offer hosted practice management from about 2003 onwards in their Osprey product. They claim to have hundreds of clients using their service online now, including Forum Law in Birmingham – www.forumlaw.co.uk
- DPS whose hosted users include McKenzie Hope (www.mackenziehope.co.uk) and King Prior (www.kingprior.co.uk)
- **Hosting of email** is becoming increasingly popular. An example: as part of overall improvements in managing IT services, Druces LLP (www.druces.com) moved their Exchange email services to be hosted by Network Si (www.networksi.co.uk), so they now deal with all aspects of management of email from setting up new users to security updates, archiving and encryption. Hosting guarantees redundancy and availability for peak periods, and releases the in-house IT team from dealing time consuming updates to let them focus on other aspects of IT.
- **Hosting of the virtual office** – the ultimate SaaS solution is a reality too. Examples include Wolferstans (www.wolferstans.com), Morrisons (www.morrisons-solicitors.co.uk) and Martin Kaye (www.martinkaye.co.uk), where all have their entire IT systems hosted at e-know.net (www.e-know.net) in Telford. All employees at each firm access their usual desktop (hosted in Telford) with all their usual Microsoft Office applications, email, digital dictation, practice and case management systems ([Lexis Nexis Axxia](#)), SharePoint etc via the Internet. All applications are integrated as they would be in their own office.

Centralising all applications and data in a highly secure environment with fast and reliable links to the Internet also facilitates seamless use of all methods of communications (mobiles, text, email, voicemail, fax, phone) producing more flexibility and improvements for users and clients. It also creates an environment that can be easily replicated and brought to life for disaster recovery and business continuity purposes.

Although Martin Kaye made this move some years back, Wolferstans and Morrisons have made this move within the past 12 months. The transition has allowed IT solutions developers working in-house at each firm to focus their time in developing better working processes, rather than fire-fighting day-to-day IT issues across their firm, with good results.

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