

Briefing

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Sense of self-serve

Williams Lea supported Clyde & Co to make a significant strategic transformation to a core business process just before lockdown in the UK, giving chief operating officer Paddy Linighan confidence that further could follow in a more agile firm-wide future

Several law firm leaders have said to **Briefing** words to the effect that the last couple of weeks of March 2020 saw about as much business transformation as they had been expecting to manage over the next couple of years. For Paddy Linighan, chief operating officer of Clyde & Co, it also coincided with a particularly crucial period of just five days.

That's when the firm made the switch over to having all inbound mail digitised and distributed daily to UK fee earners electronically as standard, through a service provided by Williams Lea. Digital post room facilities for this purpose, plus reprographics, were established in the firm's Manchester, Edinburgh and Guildford offices, covering all UK offices. And although moving to

increasingly paper-light ways of working – and this project, of course – was fortunately already on the strategic roadmap coming into 2020, the looming of lockdown certainly injected some urgency to be up and running.

“Clyde & Co had previously been quite traditional, with physical post rooms onsite in each office,” says Linighan. “We were already working towards becoming more agile, but the pandemic has accelerated the plan. Williams Lea, having worked with the firm for a number of years, was able to mobilise very quickly in March, and we're extremely pleased with the results of our collaboration.

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*Paddy Linighan, chief operating officer,
 Clyde & Co*

know that it will be available, and where to access it online, each day.” An email notification is sent, with a separate process for any items that aren’t referenced, he explains.

“The enforced working from home that we’ve seen isn’t permanent, but we were pleasantly surprised by how quickly we’ve been able to adapt to it. It has also been quite a welcome realisation for the majority of our practice groups that they can indeed work efficiently with support from our business services functions remotely.”

He adds: “One reason that the transition has been so smooth is the social and cultural capital that has already been built up within teams over time.”

Consideration of longer-term changes to ways of working will need to include safeguarding those human bonds, but the experience with Williams Lea has provided greater confidence that further change is possible, supported by reliable process and technology.

Another level of agility

For some fee earners accustomed to having their “PA and Post-it note approach”, there’s also something of a mindset shift to manage “from served to self-serve,” admits Linighan. The firm’s learning and development team has also been involved on this front, producing short virtual training courses (plus a little retraining) to help with navigation of the new post system and where to store things, for example. Nevertheless, the firm saw individual productivity increase during

lockdown in the UK, with the period up to the end of April in fact proving one of its very busiest. “We’re monitoring so as to avoid extreme spikes, as some pockets did rise quite quickly,” says Linighan. “It’s important to be mindful of potential isolation, and the wellbeing of our people and our clients comes first in our plans.”

On the point of unifying culture and values, he adds: “To all intents and purposes, Williams Lea people are also our people. They’re fully embedded on our sites, and are treated no differently.” Regular lines of communication between the two ensures that management policies are aligned. The firm’s head of facilities meets with his counterpart weekly, and Linighan catches up every month himself: “We spend a lot of time talking about what’s happening on the ground.”

He now sees strong potential to build on this foundation, tested by a crisis, as the business continues its transition to an even more flexible and agile organisation. There are, of course, several different shades of ‘hybrid’ working models that many firms are exploring. Clyde’s employee survey, carried out as lockdown was starting to ease, found 85% of people reporting they had coped well at home, with 90% expressing a wish to retain at least a proportion of the remote-working pattern and benefits.

“Williams Lea has also successfully demonstrated that you don’t need to directly control every single aspect of service in-house,” says Linighan.

“The way the team has consulted with us this year has proved what it can deliver in one of its core areas.” So the management team is now exploring possible opportunities for introducing greater process efficiency in some other areas, such as linking the digital post room service to the case management system and managing some parts of document production.

This will be alongside re-evaluation of potential for change right across the global network, he explains – for example, following the successful launch of its shared service centre in Kansas City. “We will be seeking to establish regional hubs, which will provide fast, efficient and cost-effective services to our global practice groups. Consistency is very important, and the IT team is also focused on supporting all locations to move to the same technology standards.”

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