



Technology in action

Nowhere is the saying 'time is money' more applicable than the legal profession. The more frugal a lawyer with his billable hours, the happier his clients and the more profitable his practice. Andrew Charlesworth looks at one law firm's answer

Downtime while out of the office is a drain on all businesses, but even more so on law firms where any admin time not spent on clients' cases is unprofitable. To turn this back into productive time all you need is email access. Laptops can do this but only when connected to a landline or Wi-Fi hotspot.

But that excludes the times when you are commuting or have to visit remote places. In those conditions, only the GPRS (global packet radio service) network can provide true mobile access.

Such reasoning led Richard Harvey, head of the admiralty unit at London law firm Richards Butler, to adopt RIM's (Research In Motion) BlackBerry, a handheld PDA that includes GPRS email and mobile phone facilities.

Harvey specialises in marine casualty – advising shipowners and cargo companies on claims for sinkings, collisions, pollution and how to establish salvage rights.

"The situation can change second by second, especially if I am onsite on a wreck," says Harvey. "People need to know what to do or say, what evidence needs to be preserved, what documents need to be produced."

Harvey, a former merchant seaman and a partner at Richards Butler since 1983, has worked on many transport-related cases including the Erika, Maersk Tokyo and MSC Rosa M salvages. He's often

onsite where a ship is stranded or docked, meeting shipping executives from all over the world face to face, or communicating by video conference, telephone, fax or email.

Rolled into one

Despite the reputation of law firms as technologically backward, Richards Butler has been no slouch when it comes to adopting mobile technology, pioneering the use of mobile phones, laptops, portable printers and digital photography in law.



"But laptop technology is not very robust, especially from a hotel," says Harvey. "The time we spend getting the technology to work we could be spending on something more useful. BlackBerry doesn't solve all these problems but it does mean you don't have to dial up and log on. In a meeting or at a wreck you can bash out emails there and then."

He also has a 3.5 hour commute by train every day and estimates that the BlackBerry has made his day up to 15 percent more productive. It enables him to respond to emails from the Far East before he arrives at his office and use lost time on the way home to finish off work and communicate with US clients rather than staying until late at his desk.

But Harvey is no great fan of PDAs *per se*, not finding much use for them beyond a diary. Rather, it is the always-on communications of GPRS that give BlackBerry the advantage.

RIM sold BlackBerry for a number of years in the US before it came to Europe. Harvey saw it in the hands of a US client who was disappointed that he couldn't use it here. "When he told me BlackBerry was going to be available in the UK, I started to make my own enquiries," recalls Harvey.

Independently, Richards Butler's IT director, Lee Hanley, was also following the progress of BlackBerry. "Our experience is that much can go wrong with a laptop



when you're on the move. I was looking for a mobile solution that was a lot simpler and more robust," says Hanley.

People in the firm were starting to use PDAs, but Hanley wanted a device that they could adopt as a corporate standard. "BlackBerry looked robust enough and by enabling people to receive and send real-time email it would unquestionably deliver real business benefits," he explains.

Careful consideration

The firm has a rigorous procedure for IT purchases with strict budgets and roll-out guidelines. So they purchased two BlackBerry handhelds and installed the associated BlackBerry enterprise server software for Microsoft Exchange, the firm's email system. The server software compresses and decompresses messages for transmission to handhelds over the internet via the wireless GPRS network. Encryption software keeps the messages secure in transit.

This pre-pilot stage did not go entirely smoothly. "The software was not as stable as it should have been and the hardware didn't have a proper charger. We had to iron these things out with RIM," explains Harvey. "It was very labour intensive at first to set up each individual user."

But, convinced of the value the device could bring to the firm, Harvey and Hanley persevered. "It needed someone like me to put up with a technology that didn't

work properly at first to get something at the end that stood head and shoulders above everything else," says Harvey. The modifications that he suggested were implemented by RIM.

Picking up the pace

A further pilot project of 10 units for six months proved their patience had paid off. The firm is considering withdrawing company mobile phones and issuing BlackBerries to everyone instead. It is even questioning whether some people need a laptop at all.

"It has improved the quality of communications enormously and cut down on the number of mindless mobile phone calls that people have on trains over bad lines," says Harvey. "It also makes you ask the question whether most people actually need a laptop. If

all they are doing with the laptop is email admin when they are away from their desk, then the answer is probably not."

Richards Butler will soon be piloting a time recording application on BlackBerry that enables lawyers to record the time spent on a clients' accounts while on the move. They already have the application on their desktop PCs, but having it on the BlackBerry means they can use the dead time productively when travelling back from a client meeting. It also means they are less likely to forget to book the time. "Believe it or not, lawyers do sometimes forget to bill time," says Harvey. ■

Richards Butler: at a glance

Richards Butler has law offices throughout Europe, the Middle East, Hong Kong, Beijing and Brazil and an annual turnover of £91m. Its clients consist of international merchant and investment banks as well as major organisations in sectors as diverse as insurance, commodities, entertainment and media and shipping.

The shipping department provides legal services to ship and cargo owners, banks, insurers and anyone with an interest in commercial shipping and accounts for about 30 percent of the firm's business.

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Research In Motion BlackBerry

- Telephone 01784 477 465
- Website www.blackberry.net
- Info Latest model is BlackBerry 7230, costing £199 ex VAT for colour screen; £129 ex VAT for mono screen plus a £13.99 T-Mobile contract

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