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THE FRIDAY FIVE

Five Ways to Prioritize Your Legal Tech Investments (and Get the Most Bang for Your Buck)

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Law firms are under constant pressure to adopt new, improved technology so they can increase productivity and provide better client service. Yet budgets rarely increase with the speed of technology changes. With so many technology needs out there, how do you know which investments will garner the fastest return?

By carefully prioritizing key technology investments, you can decide where your limited bucks will have the greatest impact.

Tech Investment No. 1: Look at Everyday Hardware and Software

Some types of technology are so common, or function well enough, that firms rarely take the time to review their performance. But there can be hidden drags on productivity that you can remedy easily and inexpensively.

Switch to SSD drives. Even tech-savvy lawyers probably don't spend much time thinking about their computer hard drives, but switching to a solid-state drive (SSD) instead of the more traditional hard disk drive (HDD) can offer quick ROI in faster performance and quicker boot-up times. Even a five-minute improvement in accessing the desktop can potentially save 20 hours a year for each user. Translate this time savings into accessing applications and the hours add up. While SSDs are somewhat more expensive than HDDs, the time savings will quickly pay for the difference.

Upgrade internet connections. Few firms think about their internet until there is a problem, but it may be possible to significantly improve speed and therefore productivity. Most firms have an existing contract with their internet service provider. Even if you are mid-contract, it is worth the time to investigate potential upgrades. With a little effort, office internet speed can be improved dramatically.

Improve your Wi-Fi. New Wi-Fi technologies offer much faster speeds than ones from two or three years ago. With new wireless access points (WAPs), additional performance and security options are available. Additionally, newer equipment offers a greater range of service and can potentially eliminate annoying dead spots in the office.

Revisit your firewalls. Firewalls are one of the most important security devices on the network, and poor performance hurts the whole firm. Most firewalls are switched out in a three- to five-year cycle, and every upgrade cycle offers faster devices and more features. When considering upgrading your internet connection, investigate swapping out the firewalls as well. Extra backup firewalls can be added for improved redundancy, allowing you to continue serving clients in case of failure.

Tech Investment No. 2: Keep Up with Technology Upgrades

Applying every minor software version upgrade can seem like an annoying waste of time. But ignoring multiple new releases will drag down productivity and risk exposure to security vulnerabilities. Major version changes typically require training, exploring cross-product integrations and even hardware support. Keeping current with minor updates means you will have less disruption, reduced support demand and improved productivity.

The same challenges apply to firmware and service packs. Routinely ignoring server, switch, firewall and appliance updates and service packs will create performance risks and security vulnerabilities. Ignoring interim updates risks exposure to large downtime windows.

Tech Investment No. 3: Run Fewer Servers and Run Them in the Cloud!

Wherever possible, minimize and consolidate the number of systems your firm uses. By consolidating systems, you spend less on initial costs and ongoing maintenance. Moving to the cloud or using software as a service (SaaS) allows you to expand more efficiently — and manage technology spending. Adding more capacity for new cases, new users and new workflows is easier when your systems are not constrained by the equipment you have in your office.

Tech Investment No. 4: Review Current Processes

Review your current business practices for inefficiencies. Which ones are the most labor-intensive? Look for redundancies across lawyers, departments and offices. With some research, you should be able to identify processes that could be automated or better managed through improved workflows. For example, a workflow that requires manually sending out emails for conflict checking can be automated through the smart use of conflict-checking software. Saving the time of staff members means you can free up resources to focus elsewhere.

Tech Investment No. 5: Leverage Machine Learning Search Engines

Associates used to spend days and even weeks conducting research that can now be conducted much faster through machine learning search engines. Connecting the search engine to existing firm databases and content allows you to find relevant case data and practice group expertise much quicker. Data is constantly being refined to make the searches more relevant. Many vendors offer machine learning technologies. Before you buy, be sure to understand how the software will integrate with your existing data sources, such as document management, accounting and litigation databases.

Striving for Balance

Some lawyers can't wait to embrace the latest technology, even if the ROI is ultimately negligible. Others would prefer to keep the technology they are already comfortable with and barely change anything. Neither approach is realistic or wise.

The key to effectively prioritizing technology investments is developing a comprehensive IT strategy. This means vetting new technologies, including comparing and contrasting with other law firms either directly or via industry peer groups. Generally, the flashiest or most disruptive can wait. Maintaining focus on client service

by balancing technology adoption and ongoing maintenance are critical for an effective strategy.

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