

New Year's way

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By [Kerry Underwood](#)

Kerry Underwood has resolved to cut out the paperwork, take his office online, and take on the supermarkets along the way...

My New Year's resolution is to make my office paperless by the end of 2007. Coming from me, perceived by some as not being technology's greatest friend, this is quite something.

So this is what I plan to do and these are the benefits I envision and the problems I foresee. I will give you an honest report at the end of the year.

Eliminate post and fax and replace with email. We are well on the way on this one, but first results from our client survey show that only half our clients have a personal email address and many solicitors (including us!) refuse to accept service by email. The good news is that our client survey shows that those who do have email really value our use of it. We have got to educate the clients and other lawyers.

Put all administrative files of all kinds on to DVDs and back them all up on remote or external hard drives. The new scanners are fantastic – this should be easy, if time-consuming. Pay the trainees overtime. This will have the benefit of bringing them up near to the minimum wage. (I am correct in thinking that the minimum wage does not apply to trainees, aren't I?)

Insist that suppliers only communicate electronically.

Put all closed files on DVDs etc, as above. I banned the use of staples three years ago (stapled documents cannot be fed in to copiers or scanners), but suspect that illicit use of staples will come to light. The remains of fee-earner's lunch on files cannot be scanned either.

Scan in all incoming documents that have not arrived electronically. Allocate to the appropriate file. Save in appropriate folders.

This will be the hardest part – getting lawyers to work electronically on current files – but also the most rewarding. Just imagine – counsel instructed at the touch of a mouse, and, likewise, disclosure of documents, preparation of trial bundles etc.

For example, a medical report comes in electronically from Sharon Surgeon. Instead of copying one for the client, one for the pin, one for the flap, one for the post etc – just click on "Forward" and it is sent to the client. Save it in the folders for instructing counsel, issuing proceedings, court bundle etc. Job done.

The savings in time – boring time at that – will be enormous and yet this will be the most difficult part because of the Luddism of professional people – lawyers, experts, the courts etc.

This is the big one.

Get all law reports, precedents and books etc online. We have done as much as we can already on this, but many legal publications are still not available other than in paper form. Loose-leaf publications are never kept up to date anyway. So I have culled half of our subscriptions – if you aren't available online, you have to be absolutely indispensable. Fortunately, my own books are absolutely indispensable as they are not available online (publishers – please note!)

The key problem is that this government and the Department for Constitutional Lord Chancellors, or whatever it is called, have absolutely no commitment to the proper use of technology in that they are not prepared to pay for it, a point recognised by all of the senior judiciary dealing with the issue. Many judges are very committed to information technology and make excellent use of the limited resources supplied to them. Court of Appeal judges put the average solicitor to shame in the 'use of technology' stakes.

Just imagine a world where, at the click of a mouse, you could see every other issued case against that defendant, every pleading on that point of law, every decision, every damages award. This, more than anything else, would level the playing field between claimants and deep-pocketed defendants and their insurance companies. Actually, you don't need to imagine it – it is what happens in half the states in the US.

Ho ho ho, I hear you case-managed warehouse firms chortling. We have been doing this for years. Yes, but your service is useless and your "lawyers" are useless and no one wants you. That's why you will go out of business when paying referral fees becomes an imprisonable offence.

We're not. Look at our client survey results. Our lawyers, our service, and technology as a slave and not a master – that is what I want. Any small or medium-sized firm can do the same.

Perhaps the hardest part of all will be to get clients to realise that it is possible to be a really good, personal, professional law firm and use properly modern technology, rather than those awful case management systems. Our survey shows that clients want a High Street firm. That's why Tesco is opening so many Metros and Expresses etc.

We beat Claims Direct. We beat The Accident Group.

I'm getting ready for the supermarkets.

Are you?

Postscript:

Kerry Underwood is senior partner in Underwoods