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When outsourcing outstrips itself

Two tales of outsourcing in the legal profession are highlighted this week – one at least a partial success; the other has a more uncertain future.

The former involves the outsourcing of essentially secretarial work. It is a trend that started in earnest about a year ago and was led by a magic circle firm. And it now seems that practices can benefit from cost savings. However, there are pitfalls. While the outsourcing of basic dictation to India, for example, can have the additional benefit of time efficiency – owing to the time difference the work can be done overnight and be back on computer screens in England by the following morning – there is still the old-fashioned problem of regional accents to overcome. Understandably, even the highly skilled Indians have some difficulty discerning

the nuances of a Brummie or Geordie voice.

Therefore, some firms are looking to outsource that type of function to UK-based centres. Potentially bad news for the traditional legal secretary, but in an increasingly competitive market law firms cannot be blamed for trying to be as administratively efficient as possible.

What might be a step too far is the outsourcing of actual legal work. The ever-innovative senior partner at Hemel Hempstead-based Underwoods has been trying to do just that for the past year. So far he has not had a nibble, but he confidently forecasts that his model will be a revolutionary success within five years. That's a long time to wait – but then following the Clementi reforms, innovative business structures are going to be all the more prevalent and likely to succeed.