

Off site working

Remote access in some form has been part of most law firm's infrastructure for many years. Primarily aimed at letting partners get access to their email, and sometimes documents, the uses have not changed much even though the technology may have moved on.

The recent large scale take up of the Blackberry by law firms and the widespread availability of broadband connections has changed both the requirements and the options considerably. Email only access from a laptop is redundant for partners with a Blackberry, removing the original requirement altogether, and home broadband has finally made it possible to deliver complex systems at a reasonable cost.

What are the demands from users working off site, and what services should firms be looking to provide? The answer to this is best looked at by splitting off site workers into two groups: those people working from home; and those people working while travelling.

Travellers have a wide variety of requirements, and in an ideal world firms will support as many of these as possible if they can be done in a cost effective fashion. The likelihood is that in many cases connections will be made over low bandwidth links such as analogue dial up or using GPRS through a mobile phone. These types of connection will not allow long term working on sophisticated applications. In most cases they will be sufficient to provide access to web enabled systems which will cope with the most urgent needs. For more regular use, slower connections work best for synchronising data from an offline client – a process well known with Outlook and achievable with some other systems.

The second option for travellers is to provide secure web access to systems from any PC they can find with a high speed internet connection. Many companies now provide open access terminals for visitors in their reception and cybercafés can be found almost anywhere, although they are not always well suited to the requirements of the roving businessman. Most major hotels provide computers with internet access in their business suite in addition to providing broadband access for guests with laptops. Software applications for lawyers these days almost always come with an intranet module which allows access to all or most of the functionality, and often this is the only user interface provided. It is no longer the complex and expensive problem it used to be to create a secure extranet site for staff to access these systems, and this kind of provision can have huge benefits.

For staff working from home, firms should be looking to provide them with the same access that they have in the office. This may sound as if it requires a huge investment to achieve, but the reality is that systems can and should be installed in such a way that this works. One of the reasons this is the best design is that the same architecture that supports applications working over broadband VPN links will also support access to those applications from multiple offices over WAN links, and more importantly provides a structure to create a resilient

infrastructure as part of the business continuity and disaster recovery plans. If systems are configured to operate with users who may or may not be on the same site, the risks associated with losing access to any one site are reduced.

Taking this model one step further provides even more options for innovative firms. A setup that allows servers and users to be on separate sites not only supports users remote from the office but could also have the servers offsite, supporting users in the office. Again, as part of the business continuity plan this gives great flexibility, but it also allows systems to be provided and supported by external third parties. If all support for your PMS is provided by the vendor, and they need regular access to your system, why not run the PMS from their location, and have your staff access it from the office?

To summarise, how should a modern firm be looking to design an infrastructure for the future? The main answer is that what is required is flexibility, and this is best achieved by removing the requirements for the central IT systems and the users to be on the same site.

As a short checklist firms should try to achieve the following:

- Move central systems out of the offices to secure data centres, preferably with backup systems on a second site
- Provide 'thick client' access from office PCs, and firm computers provided for use from home, including laptops.
- Provide 'thin client' intranet/web front ends to systems, either as a main application or as a secondary option (for example, use Outlook and make Outlook Web Access available)
- Support secure access to web enabled systems from the internet for use from 3rd party computers (cybercafés, client sites)
- Support dial up access (fixed line or mobile) to web enabled applications from firm laptops
- Provide as many staff as possible with broadband internet connections from home, especially fee earners and support managers, and support staff who may need to work shifts or provide out of hours cover.

In this way, firms can provide much more flexible working arrangements for staff, adapt to changes such as new offices or relocations, and maintain business continuity through a disaster, rather than having to recover from it.

Successful firms of the future will be those demonstrating flexibility and having an ability to adapt quickly. Mobility is no longer just about users; it is about mobility in business.

Adam Westbrooke is the managing director of Firstcourt, a strategic IT advice company specialising in helping professional services firms make the best use of their systems. For more information call Adam on 0870 350 3660 or see <http://www.firstcourt.co.uk>.