

Clarke Willmott win HM Customs & Excise Debt Recovery contract

Background

Clarke Willmott has come a long way since Charles Peard Clarke established his practice in Taunton in 1898 and is now a top 100 legal firm operating from four offices in Taunton, Bristol, Southampton and Birmingham. During the years 1999 to 2004 the firm more than doubled in size and turnover. It now has 52 partners and over 500 staff offering high quality service and legal expertise to clients across the UK via a comprehensive network of departments designed specifically for business, intermediaries and private individuals.

One of these departments (the Business Recovery Unit (BRU)) was recently recognised by the magazine 'Credit Today' as the Commercial Credit Recovery Team of the Year. BRU deals exclusively with debt recovery, and one of the reasons for this prestigious award was Clarke Willmott's decision, some years earlier, to invest in the very latest technology and then to continue to invest and upgrade their systems as and when necessary. This positive approach to information technology, not only enabled them to provide a high level of service to their client base; it also had a significant impact when it came to winning new business.

The Opportunity

Modern business demands modern practice and hence modern systems. This in turn means highly efficient and flexible technical solutions that can be operated by non-technical staff with the minimum of effort. The use of modern technology to achieve significant business growth is exemplified perfectly by the tremendous opportunities for growth within a number of areas of legal business, not least of which is Debt Recovery. However as new technology has been introduced so major client institutions have become more demanding with regard to timescales, overall efficiency and of course the 'price per matter'. However if the firm concerned can meet these demanding requirements, the profit opportunities are significant.

The Problem

Although Clarke Willmott had been using Linetime's specialist software Deptime for many years they felt that they couldn't tender for larger contracts if they were not totally convinced that their in-house IT systems were the very best available and hence able to meet the high demands of institutional clients like Customs & Excise.

To this end an in-house steering group of 4 experienced Debt Recovery specialists was established to investigate all the possible alternative software systems on the market. To enable this to be done in a logical and scientific manner they first of all produced a 'system specification' document that reflected all their possible current and future requirements.

As Jane Dunlop, a senior associate at Clarke Willmott and its Business Recovery Manager, said, "We were acutely aware that we needed to take a close look at the market, as software, just like hardware, can become outdated very quickly if the supplier is not on 'top of its game'."

"Apart from the potential HM Customs & Excise contract, we were also conscious that we needed to invest more in IT if existing clients were to continue to receive the excellent level of service they had come to expect.

"Clarke Willmott has always prided itself on being a very modern legal practice that is not shy about adopting new technology and new practices so long as they provided a direct benefit to both the firm and our clients. To this end we included in the 'system specification' a number of new items that would enable us to offer additional client services, for example, we were keen to discover how the Internet and Web Access in general could be utilised to everyone's benefit."

The Process

Once the system specification had been completed it was circulated to the top 5 legal software suppliers in the country asking for a detailed response. The result was that after a couple of months Clarke Willmott had narrowed the field to a short list of 3. They then set about a period of discussion, demonstrations, meetings and visits. The whole process took approximately 10 months from the initial brainstorming and production of their ideal wish list to the signing of the order for DebtimeSQL from Linetime.

The Solution

As Jane said, there were many reasons for choosing DebtimeSQL: "The product's features were very important in our decision making; such as the fact that it was developed using the most advanced SQL database technology by a firm with experts in the legal marketplace. Plus the fact that it had been designed specifically for the Debt Recovery market and wasn't simply a tailored Case Management system. This was also very important. We also liked the product's inherent flexibility as shown by its ability to easily handle a range of different types of debt business, such as high or low volume and high or low value. In fact this last point was a specific item within our system specification as was the ability to have multiple defendants held together on one file. The ability to take out a variety of different actions against different individuals, all within the same matter, was very important to our plans for future business development.

"As you would expect DebtimeSQL contains all the standard features of any debt management package, however it also offered us a range of additional benefits including comprehensive interest calculations covering late payment, monthly interest and variable bank rates. All of which would make our work so much easier."

"Another winning benefit was the ease with which non-technical users could use the Designers software within DebtimeSQL to easily build customer specific screens and procedures. This one feature improves the throughput of work enormously enabling the user to take on a diverse range of new jobs quickly and easily and hence more profitably."

"While it may seem obvious, the fact that it was able to be totally integrated into all the other Liberate software such as Accounts and the CRM module was very important to the smooth running of the practice and in particular the quick and efficient management reporting that is so crucial within a large modern firm like Clarke Willmott."

"The ability to interface directly to the Internet via Liberate On-Line was a crucial and major benefit of DebtimeSQL. For a firm to be able to offer clients direct access via a secure Internet connection to their own debt cases and thereby enable them to quickly and easily submit on-line instructions, was perceived by our steering group as a great benefit for the future. As you can imagine, such a facility improves the whole debt management process enormously. If you can improve the speed and accuracy with which you communicate with both your clients and their customers alike, you have improved the overall efficiency of the whole debt recovery process. And therefore you have undoubtedly improved your firm's overall profitability."

The Result

After deciding to make the investment in DebtimeSQL from Linetime the steering group responsible for the system specification began working with the Linetime implementation team to ensure that the installation of the new software did not in any way disrupt their business and met all their requirements in terms of timescale.

Jane Dunlop again: "Once again I am very pleased to report that the Linetime support team were excellent. We agreed an implementation procedure and timescale and they stuck to it rigidly. I must also comment on the quality of their training team. Although we had been using the old Debtime product for many years we still needed to invest in training for the new system and once again all I can say is that it was first class."

In addition to offering existing clients a range of new services, installing DebtimeSQL has also enabled the firm to win some significant new business. For example, Clarke Willmott was appointed as the main solicitor for civil debt recovery on behalf of HM Customs and Excise across the whole of England and Wales. Three separate firms of solicitors undertook the work previously. This one contract represents a major boost to the firm's Business Recovery Team, which is quickly establishing its name in the provision of services to Government agencies after being awarded a similar contract by The Insolvency Service six months earlier. Jane Dunlop commented, "We are delighted to have been awarded this contract. We have proved our experience in this field and feel that this has been recognised through our appointment by HM Customs and Excise.

"While I know HM Customs & Excise took many different aspects of the firm into consideration before awarding us the contract, our ability to handle the type and volume of cases they generated and hence the quality and functionality of our in-house computer system, undoubtedly played a big part in their decision making process."

Stephen Allinson, Clarke Willmott's Head of Insolvency added, "Insolvency and debt recovery are key legal disciplines for many leading law firms, so we are pleased to have been selected from a highly competitive field."

The final comment comes from Kat Nicholls, who is BRU 's System Administrator at Clarke Willmott. " The installation of DebtimeSQL has enabled us to significantly improve our response time with respect to the ever changing requirements of both the firm and its clients. This improved flexibility and efficiency means that we can actively pursue new business in the full knowledge that our software systems can readily accommodate any and all types of work a new client is likely to throw at us. This new software from Linetime gives us the confidence to agree to and meet the very tight timescales such new and existing clients demand from us. "An added benefit is that we can employ new non-technical staff and train them in the use of the DebtimeSQL system very quickly, thereby making them productive and hence profitable members of our team with the minimum of delay."

"I don't think that I'm exaggerating when I say that it is unlikely that our business would have been as successful as it has been without DebtimeSQL and the excellent technical support we enjoy from the Linetime team."

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