

Commercial advantage in a commoditised market

How top-50 law firm DWF is turning procedure into process to increase productivity and client value in a highly commoditised work area

Many law firms set up separate businesses to deal with debt recovery, but DWF saw an opportunity in an increasingly competitive marketplace to keep its debt recovery service in-house. To succeed with this strategy, however, it had to provide more client value, while maintaining margin.

To achieve those goals, DWF had to both increase the amount of workflow and process management within the debt recovery part of the firm and deliver more transparency and ease of use to clients – cutting the cost of delivery while increasing the quality of client service.

Richard Wilson sits on the senior management team of DWF's recoveries team as senior recoveries manager. Keeping things in-house, he says, meant the firm could offer the value in handling both commoditised and more complex debt work, capitalising on its full service reputation – but it meant the cost of delivery had to be driven down.

More with less – the commoditisation mantra

As an ambitious top-50 law firm, DWF has blue chip companies and high street banks on its client roster – clients that demand great service delivery as standard, but are also increasingly demanding more for less from their panel firms. DWF provides recovery services for consumer or commercial debt, ranging from credit card loans and domestic mortgages to asset-based finance (e.g. leased vehicles) and B2B debt for companies such as Otis, Anglian Water and Portakabin.

"The market we operate in is increasingly competitive and commoditised," Wilson says. "So it's my job to make sure we're as efficient as we can be, and that we reduce costs. Our workflow and processes need to be automated to reduce the admin burden on fee-earners while providing the best service to our clients – which means we stay competitive."

Wilson was brought in to help develop Linetime's case management system, Liberate, within DWF's debt recovery team, because the system builds on workflow and process automation to increase efficiency, reduce costs and provide greater value to its clients – as Wilson puts it, "it means we can offer clients an improved higher-volume debt recovery service".

A key way to leverage technology in debt recovery is to allow for bulk work to be pushed straight into the system, where cases are automatically created and the debtor communication is kickstarted immediately. DWF's clients can drop data on to an FTP site from where it's uploaded straight into Linetime.

"It's easy for the client," says Wilson, "and the first letters can be going out the door in a matter of hours. It's a speedy service, so our client experiences quicker returns on bad debts, and the workflow is automated, so we're more efficient." Once the case is on the system, the procedure is turned into a process. For example, each member of the recoveries team accesses an individual 'work box' daily that reminds them, seven or 14 days after the first letter goes out, to either make follow up calls, ask the client for further instructions or to issue a claim form.

DWF's Liberate CMS can push claims en masse first to the Claims Production Centre, which issues claims electronically, and then on to the County Court Bulk Centre. Mass issue, says Wilson, "reduces workload and it's faster". "Hundreds of claims can be issued at once without the laborious process of printing each form, signing it and then posting it. And the court fees are cheaper – a saving we can pass on to the client."

Delivering client confidence through transparency

On the client side, the 'extranet' element in Liberate, B2C Online Case Tracking, gives clients a clear view into current cases as well as the ability to directly influence the firm. Bringing this kind of client-facing technology to a wider legal audience lets law firms deliver more engagement transparency at no greater cost. "Our clients can see a full case history, review cases and issue instructions all via a secure internet connection," says Wilson.

Otis, the global elevator and escalator business, is a prime example of how a client can get the best out of such a system. Otis has 25 UK credit controllers, all of whom use B2C Online Case Tracking to review cases and correspond with DWF. "Otis credit controllers log on B2C at certain times of the day, review all the case histories on one screen, and can then issue us with instructions on multiple cases with just one click. These instructions are immediately stored in the case history," Wilson says.

"It gives Otis a full audit trail of transactions and reduces the risk of any errors. They can manage their debt recovery process more efficiently and ensure that they're controlling costs. We're helping them do that with Linetime, which really adds value to them."

Management information

Client companies thrive on management information, so savvy firms can add value by delivering that information. Using Liberate, DWF can deliver bespoke reports to clients with relative ease. "We create specific data fields relevant to each client so that we can provide them with exactly the report that they want. It's just another example of delivering better service, making sure that we are always adding value in a very competitive market", explains Wilson.

Linetime technology also enables DWF to capture any data the client needs. Most effectively used in civil recovery and insurance loss recovery work, "it really does add value for clients", Wilson says. One example he cites is with a DWF civil recovery client, one of the UK's major insurers. The client can use the data collected by DWF in Liberate to construct geographical and risk 'heat maps' to help mitigate risk. "It's being able to provide these sorts of benefits that really sets us apart in terms of client service," Wilson says.

Automating risk management across regulatory environments

DWF is always looking to "drive more efficiency and provide our clients with additional value", says Wilson. When dealing with financial services clients, law firms face a draconian regulatory backdrop, but this can also be turned into an opportunity. DWF has integrated Liberate with call recording software – an out-of-the-box capability for Liberate. The combination delivers integrated regulatory and case-handling value to clients that require all communications to be recorded.

DWF's pre-legal collections team now uses an integrated audio recording solution in all debt cases, recording all recovery team telephone conversations. Liberate integration means voice files from telephone calls can easily be attached to case histories in case management, which allows clients direct access to the recordings via the B2C Online Case Tracking system. "It's a real bonus for us and the client," Wilson says, especially because "FSA regulations require all mortgage related discussions to be recorded".

"What's great is that this provides our clients with additional value and gives them increased confidence, because they are privy to all the work being done on each case." And, while it's delivering this value to the client, it's also creating more reasons for the client to pick DWF over any other firm – and it's automating the process, which drives down costs.

"Put simply," Wilson says, "Linetime ensures that our processes and workflows are automated wherever possible, so we're not spending time on repetitive tasks. We're more productive, more efficient and we can provide our clients with a better service."