

Predictions for IT and Legal Practice in 2007 (for Society of Computers & Law)

These predictions were submitted to the Society of Computers & Law on 29 November 2006 for publication with other experts' predictions for IT and legal practice in 2007 and were published shortly after at www.scl.org.

Blogs and RSS Feeds - the inexorable increase in broadband power and connectivity, and the development of new Web 2.0 services, will see more law firms and more individuals in the legal sector publishing Blogs and using RSS Feeds. Take a look at an inspiring Canadian law perspective given by Knowledge Services Director, Steve Matthews, on the "**Top 10 Uses of RSS for Law Firms**" (see <http://vancouverlawlib.blogspot.com/2006/09/top-10-uses-for-rss-in-law-firms.html>). RSS should provide law firms with an easy-to-adopt capability to trigger fresh innovation in their legal working practices. I commend the SCL on launching its own RSS Feed in August 2006. A legal pioneer, since its inception in May 2000, Out-Law.com, already has a large portfolio of RSS Feeds on different legal subjects, and another good example of things to come. As at today, how many orange RSS icons could I find on a survey of the home pages of the UK's Top 10 firms? They were as hard to find as food in the celebrity Queensland jungle, which has been keeping many TV viewers amused in the last fortnight!

Microsoft - Vista and Office 2007 will certainly occupy the attention of law firms even if, as other commentators' predictions on this page point out, many will wait and see before adoption. Liam Flanagan of Tikit (which (another prediction) will no doubt grow bigger and stronger still in 2007) sounds some timely advice regarding Word 2007.

Office Groove 2007 - having been an avid user of Groove Virtual Office for several years, I have a personal wish that Groove (which is shipped with the Enterprise version of Microsoft Office 2007) eventually makes it into the mainstream of UK professional services activity, starting next year. Lawyers collaborating more effectively with other lawyers and with their clients is a constant challenge. Collaborative working solutions, like those offered by Groove, can only improve efficiency and enhance profitability. Which law firms will be the first to have the courage to try Groove at an enterprise level? After all, it would be reasonable to assume that Bill Gates saw a very good business reason for purchasing Ray Ozzie's Groove Networks in mid 2005.

Digital signatures and other secure types of electronic signature – having suffered the personal disappointment of losing money and two years' earning capacity during 2000 and 2001 in a start-up venture (to build a system to manage the complete lifecycle of electronic identity credentials to take advantage of new electronic signatures laws enacted in 2000), every year I continue to wonder whether it will be next year that sees a real appetite among lawyers and their clients to use digital signatures. I optimistically hope so. The advent of e-Conveyancing (see also below), which draws ever closer to reality, may be one of the triggers for change. A major law firm PR disaster regarding confidential client and matter information continuing to be sent by unencrypted e-mail and leaked into the public domain, with substantial losses to the client concerned, may be another trigger.

E-Conveyancing - the Department of Constitutional Affairs has given the go-ahead to the Land Registry to launch its long-awaited e-Conveyancing pilot service in October 2007. This will occur only four months after the launch of Home Information Packs on 1 June 2007. By definition, and given that this was expressly contemplated

by the Land Registration Act 2002, e-Conveyancing presumably means that e-Signatures will be used both to sign e-Documents and also to confirm that various e-Steps in the e-Conveyancing process have been completed.

Skype - during 2006, my Skype Email Toolbar (along with Google, of course) proved to be my most valuable desktop application. The amazing thing also is that this, and other Skype toolbars, are free downloads. I have been able to look up all my Microsoft Outlook contacts and SkypeOut them straight from my PC, (a) at lower cost than my traditional telephone suppliers, (b) without the inconvenience of having to key a telephone number into my landline or mobile, and (c) with the convenience of my Plantronics headset (which, coincidentally, I am also using to dictate these predictions using Dragon speech recognition, a previous year's prediction (2003) I must admit has not developed as much as I had hoped as an add-value to the very successful digital dictation deployments). Skype will continue to innovate in 2007, and along with other global brands, lead the convergence of services delivered through PCs. TVs, mobiles and other devices.

Outsourcing – “the toothpaste”, as Neil Cameron is apt to say, “is out of the tube” on this one, definitely. The Clifford Chance / Integreon / India story and legal outsourcing generally are ones to watch with interest in 2007.

"White Circles and Magic Shoes?" - will 2007 see the first transatlantic merger between a Magic Circle firm and a White Shoe firm? With the Profit Per Equity Partner figures in the UK global firms rising significantly during 2006 (plus some recent headline grabbing seven figure figures per equity partner quoted for 2007), are the comparable profit figures between UK and US partners now sufficiently close to trigger some major transatlantic merger action?

The Google YouTube and MySpace Generation - with more graduates from this generation joining law firms as trainee solicitors and young qualified lawyers, and also becoming consumers of professional services in their own right, the gap between fluent technology users and technology luddites will become ever greater within the same organisation. As one of my former firm's managing partners might say, adopting McKinsey principles learnt from Harvard Business School professors, “how does this gap affect the organisation's alignment of its structure, strategy, systems, style, staff, skills and shared values?”

Law Firm Strategic Reviews and Alternative Business Structures - with the Legal Services Bill due to receive Royal Assent in summer 2007, and Alternative Business Structures a core part of such legislation, law firms of all shapes and sizes will see fit during 2007 to conduct a strategic review of where they are, where they are going, and how they wish to get there. If they do not, they may be left behind while their competitors are energised by the opportunity of change, rather than scared by its threat. One interesting precedent is about to be created in Australia, which some in the UK may follow, with the imminent scheduled listing of Integrated Legal Holdings Limited, which was incorporated to establish a model by which the ownership of existing independent law firms and related businesses can be consolidated under one listed legal services entity. The different responses to the Legal Services Act as enacted are likely to be the most noteworthy events affecting the legal sector in 2007.

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