

"Killer" applications - digital dictation and speech recognition

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Introduction. Law firms are increasingly becoming aware of, and also experiencing, the business benefits of digital dictation and speech recognition. The rise of digital dictation, in particular, is one of the most noticeable trends in the UK legal market in the last 12 months. Not a week goes by without press coverage detailing another law firm installing the technology. And unlike speech recognition, digital dictation is, in most cases, being rolled out firmwide. So what are the differences and associated benefits? This article will explore how:

- speech recognition can be an invaluable tool for individuals or very small firms;
- digital dictation is a highly beneficial technology for all practices typically with over 5 fee-earners; and
- knowledge management (KM) objectives underpin and can fully justify digital speech projects.

Speaking as both a lawyer and a committed user of speech technologies, they are absolutely among the few must have "killer" applications for all businesses, lawyers included.

My background to using speech technology. During 1998 and 1999, I became a much more active user of the keyboard, as a result of changing jobs and role. Without realising it, I got some upper body aches and pains, as a result of the sudden change of working practice, and also not taking regular breaks from the screen and keyboard. No doubt, a common tale! Having subsequently taken good occupational health advice, I was then better informed to manage intensive screen and keyboard work. At that time, I was aware that speech recognition software had made a great leap forward, so I could not wait to try it. I first experienced speech recognition in autumn 1999, when I left private legal practice to establish my KM consultancy. In setting up on my own, I could not afford the luxury of a permanent secretary, so speech recognition was a must try. Many sole practitioners will be in a similar situation. Although becoming proficient on the keyboard and an advanced user of technology, I never was, nor will be, a touch typist. When I began my consultancy career, speech recognition gave me the freedom simply to talk at my machine and create letters and documents and answer emails at will. Now I could not function without it. I could, for example, take my laptop to a client for a meeting, and then disappear into a meeting room to produce a report for the client straight away. After a short initial period using a good branded vendor product, I quickly realised that performance would be greatly increased by a simple hardware upgrade of my desktop computer processor and memory, which I did. I also decided to turn to a specialist consultancy provider of digital dictation and speech recognition software, BigHand, which I could see was starting to make a name for itself in the legal market. This was to prove a crucial decision. As a single user, the right product for me was speech recognition, and the software and training package which I purchased from BigHand, was money incredibly well spent. I was up and running immediately, and have never looked back. BigHand has worked with a number of law firms since my first experience of them, and their TotalSpeech product has become the UK's leading legal network workflow digital dictation system.

Classic KM in action. As a strong advocate of effective KM in law firms, I shall continue to talk about speech technology in the context of a planned digital speech project. But first, what are the business benefit objectives? My top-level KM objectives are:

1. To save people time.
2. To increase quality and raise best practice.
3. To add value to clients.
4. To increase profitability and turnover.
5. To increase intellectual capital.

KM objectives in a digital speech project. Almost every specific business objective can come within one of the above top-level objectives. A digital dictation project could have all five objectives but, in every case, would certainly include numbers 1 and 4.

Choices. Clients have a choice of either, or both of, digital dictation or speech recognition products, which can be customised to suit particular needs. Digital dictation allows a user to dictate directly into a computer, using a handheld microphone or a headset. A sound file is then sent automatically via the firm's network to a designated secretary to be transcribed. Digital dictation is essentially about replacing inflexible analogue cassette tapes with flexible digital voice files. Speech recognition goes a stage further and allows the user to dictate directly into a new document, a new e-mail or other compatible application, with the text being automatically transcribed in front of the user. The user can then use voice commands, or the mouse and keyboard, or a combination of both, to correct and amend the text.

Law firm experiences. Feedback from case studies conclusively points to a strong preference among law firms for digital dictation, rather than speech recognition, as the primary solution. There are a number of good reasons for this. As busy professional people, lawyers are naturally reluctant to make sudden changes to their working practices. Digital dictation actually involves very little change. At its simplest, it is a straight switch from cassette tapes to digital speech files. Fee earners dictate into a handset (some use headsets), and secretaries continue to transcribe the files into letters, documents and forms using headsets and footpedals. The key is that, while there is little change to the fee-earner's current dictation style, the system has many additional subtle benefits.

Benefits. Digital dictation, not only brings direct cost and time savings, but also drives a natural change in working practices for the overall benefit of the practice. For example:

- fee earners can use the insert function to allow quick editing of previously recorded text or instructions;
- secretaries find the quality of the voice recording much higher than on cassette. Therefore, turnaround is quicker and errors are reduced;
- secretarial workloads are much easier to manage, because the system is transparent. Secretaries, fee earners and departmental supervisors can all monitor progress of their digital "tapes" on screen;
- voice files can be processed, as per normal, on a "cab rank" basis by job priority, whether through "own" secretary, or "department" secretaries, and/or "central WP" secretaries. Sharing of excess work becomes a more natural "team" responsibility. But, I should stress that teamwork here does not equate to a "typing pool", which may not be a popular or appropriate infrastructure for some firms and their employees. Each client still controls how the secretarial function should be structured within the particular firm;
- files can be processed from remote locations, whether that be a different part of the office from the user, or perhaps even a completely different office;
- secretary to fee earner ratios can be increased; and
- overtime and secretarial 'cover' costs can be reduced.

Cost savings. The cost savings possible through introducing the system can be readily identified, and more importantly, can be measured relatively easily both

throughout the project, and also following full implementation. Many BigHand clients, for example, can quote a significant cost saving in the first year after implementation and, and in some cases, within just a few months.

Conclusion. You need to recognise your particular needs and select the right combination of speech technologies. As a self-employed consultant, I have taken advantage of speech recognition software, combined with the increasing processing power of modern desktop machines, to talk at my machine, as if I was talking to a human being. **"Seeing is indeed believing"**. I can create new documents, send and reply to emails, draft PowerPoint presentations, insert numbers into Excel spreadsheets, and complete blank spaces in online Web forms, all using speech recognition. This is a sign of what technology can, and will continue to do, for all our benefits. For law firms, the sensible first step in achieving the business benefits highlighted above is through a workflow digital dictation system, such as TotalSpeech. Case studies to date have shown organisations gain a great deal from it. Whatever your firm size, small, medium, large, part of a regional, national or global network, just think of the cost and time savings, and improved working practices, with an immediate and quantifiable return on investment, and yet very little change of behaviour required.

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