

## Case Study

### Cobbetts LLP

When a well-established and successful firm embarks on a significant strategic change, it had better take full account of the associated risks or face the potential for substantial damage, both to its business and reputation. The probability of unintended consequences rises when the change in question is a one-off event, never before experienced by management. It was just such a situation that Top 40 law firm Cobbetts found itself in.

The firm was four months away from finalising the landmark merger of its Manchester and Leeds offices with another practice in Birmingham, and needed all 700 staff in the enlarged firm to use common IT and phone systems. To complicate matters further, 190 employees in Birmingham were set to relocate to another part of the city at around the same time. Two IT systems, three cities and the distinct, tribal culture of a newly-enlarged, 91 partner law firm all combined to make this a particularly tough project, explains Cobbetts' finance director James Boyd.

"We were facing a classic 'double whammy' situation, where the consequences of not getting things right would be hugely damaging. We have some very long-established client relationships and at the time were engaged in some key cases on their behalf. And on top of that, unlike most other businesses, our main shareholders are actively working in the business, so you soon hear about it if things aren't going to plan!"

It was against this backdrop, and with no appropriately experienced colleagues to manage the firm's IT transition, that Boyd suggested his firm hire an interim executive. Enquiries in his personal business network, allied to desk research, identified three potential firms supplying interim managers. Boyd opted to work with BIE Interim Executive.

"It became clear that BIE had the best reputation and there was a marked difference in the quality of its candidates," he adds.

Steve Dengel, director of BIE's Birmingham office, introduced Graham van Terheyden to Boyd, a former corporate IT director with several years of interim management experience under his belt, covering legal, recruitment, manufacturing and pharmaceutical sectors. Although Cobbetts was his second IT assignment for a law firm, van Terheyden believes it's the variety and wide ranging experiences of other interim work that brings real value to each new role.

"This was my first assignment through BIE. So when Steve Dengel said he'd join me at the first client meeting, and that this was routine BIE practice, I was a bit sceptical about the need. In fact, it turned out to be very useful, not just in terms of the personal support offered but also in helping to understand the politics and culture of the client firm."

Boyd, too, was pleasantly surprised by this level of personal involvement:

"It showed BIE wanted to understand us and ensure Graham and Cobbetts were a good match. Steve Dengel took time to regularly follow up to verify all was going well. This was a real plus," he says.

Dengel and van Terheyden found they had a client with a very clear view of the assignment, and a firm belief that IT must be driven by business needs, providing a high standard of internal service. However, the consensus at the time was that the firm's overall IT function still had some way to go in these respects. Compared to the Manchester and Leeds offices, Birmingham was perceived to be behind in service terms, and questions were being asked about maintaining this local resource. So van Terheyden began the assignment with a change mandate on top of managing the technical integration and office move. The starting point was a quickly-organised all-IT staff meeting, he explains.

"Rumour and speculation had started and had to be dealt with quickly. I needed to meet everyone anyway so this was a good way to deal with two issues at once. It turned out to be the first time anyone had called everyone together. We had a frank exchange about the reality of what was about to happen and ended the speculation. It also became obvious we had a mini-culture change situation: no-one had ever told the Birmingham team clearly enough that there was an internal service shortfall and the IT function's key role to the business wasn't recognised."

Meanwhile, van Terheyden had begun a detailed IT audit, mapping out the numerous systems, technologies, practices and capabilities, and to identify those that were 'best of breed'. What this revealed was that the Birmingham IT team was technically capable but lacked the right leadership and management for a service-led business. To the surprise of Cobbetts' Birmingham partners, he recommended keeping the local IT support team.

"Using the audit findings, we took the decision for the most part to standardise on the systems used at the two Northern offices. Although Birmingham had better systems in some aspects, we faced a prohibitive migration and re-training cost for the other two cities. The exception was Birmingham's case management system, which we did migrate, because it had a much larger practice group using it," he explains.

"With IT systems you have to be pragmatic; you can't just use financial and technical parameters to inform the final approach. You have to listen to people and incorporate their needs into your final recommendations. It's no good having the best IT system if people don't like it and won't use it."

The audit also highlighted a number of complex, technical challenges ahead. Some 200 PCs had to be upgraded. For the Birmingham office move, there was the physical relocation of all IT hardware, a new network and a 'voice over internet' (VoIP) telephone system, considered 'cutting edge' at the time, to configure. To get all staff operating on a common, integrated IT platform for emails, calendars, and directories was a particular challenge because three different versions of the Microsoft Office suite of programmes were in use.

Cobbetts' IT people were persuaded by van Terheyden that they faced a huge and interesting challenge – one that would provide a learning opportunity and would be good for their careers. It is testimony to van Terheyden's ability to lead and motivate that none of Cobbetts' IT staff left the business during his extended 14-month tenure.

"Graham was calm under pressure and understood the importance of listening to all our stakeholders, incorporating their needs in his final delivery. It's down to his leadership, management and technical abilities that on the official first day of the newly merged firm, we had a much-improved, integrated IT and phone system.

"Technicalities aside, his legacy is twofold: he changed the culture of our IT support team to provide the high quality service we had originally envisaged; and he recruited his permanent replacement who inherited well-set-up systems and a motivated, cohesive IT team. At an important milestone for Cobbetts and for a controlled cost, he delivered a major change that I believe otherwise wouldn't have happened," concludes Boyd.

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