LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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THINKING OUT CLOUD

TRANSLATING TECH TO BUSINESS

The Time to Jump on the Cloud Bandwagon Is Now

Law firms are (still) lagging behind in the adoption of cloud technologies — but surging when it comes to mobility, especially leveraging mobile devices to remain productive anywhere, anytime.

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What gives you confidence in your iPhone and apps that you don't get from your firm's cloud-based practice management initiative? Did you know that global technology profits are being fueled by staggering growth in cloud infrastructure *because* of the demand for all-you-can-eat mobility, internet access and bandwidth?

So, 20-plus years after the launch of first-generation consumer-focused cloud services like Hotmail, who's to blame for the still lukewarm response to cloud technology in law firms? Attorneys don't care as long as it works "just like the tech I use at home," and they say, "My client doesn't yell at me for putting their info in the sky." Law firm IT bought in long ago but gave up trying to convince skeptical leadership (and clients). Many legal technology vendors are in an arms race, scrambling to "go cloud" to say they have, only to realize that firm customers are not ready to leap forward.

A MORE SECURE CLOUD

Recent cloud adoption statistics paint a somewhat optimistic picture. According to ILTA's 2015 Technology Survey, 51 percent of responding firms indicated increasing adoption of cloud-based solutions in the upcoming year, and 99 percent indicated either increasing or staying the same regarding cloud adoption. Also of note, 69 percent of firms with more than 350 attorneys predict

increased cloud adoption versus only 49 percent among firms with less than 350 attorneys (including 41 percent for firms with less than 50 attorneys).

Compare this to 2009, when we first asked ILTA member firms (with 50 or more attorneys) about their cloud computing strategy. At the time, only 9 percent of respondents were implementing a cloud strategy, and another 30 percent were actively considering future use.

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These statistics reveal a shift in cloud adoption based on firm size. Five to seven years ago, most cloud innovation came from small(ish) law firms better positioned to head for the cloud based on less (perceived) security risk, more autonomy in making swift decisions, and fewer resources to maintain internal architecture and applications. Today, large firms are making the bold cloud moves, but often for reasons you would not expect: security and information governance.

In a recent announcement, Am Law 100/Global 100 firm BakerHostetler cited "world-class security-as-a-service and compliance infrastructure" as key reasons for switching to a native cloud-based document management system. As mentioned in this column before, more law firms are realizing that third-party cloud providers are best positioned and equipped to provide top-notch security and information governance. Not too long ago, lack of security and comprehensive governance was routinely cited as the top reason not to embrace the cloud. The push and pull of cloud adoption in legal will continue.

Is your firm making a strategic "cloud first" decision to leverage security, application flexibility and resource savings, or are firm clients, especially the highly regulated ones, dictating the terms of "safe" cloud engagement?

Regardless, the thrust of mobile everything is making cloud adoption — even in legal — inevitable. In a recent conversation, Matt Duncan, Chief Executive Officer of native cloud pioneer NetDocuments, said the future of the cloud will rely on an increasing focus on system integration and user customization. This makes sense: while firms are looking for simplicity and seamlessness, even invisibility when it comes to their mission-critical applications, they are focused on user adoption and a "no user left behind" credo when it comes to engaging with the cloud.

"Apps and integration marketplaces and platforms, and the technology and channel partners to support them, will be at the forefront of legal technology cloud innovation," says Duncan.

EMBRACE AMBIVALENCE

Pull back the covers on recent cloud market surveys, and you'll find topics such as security and flexibility topping the most compelling reasons to embrace *and* avoid cloud computing charts. Cloud-first firms love the flexibility and ironclad security and governance afforded by cloud solutions, while the cloud nay-sayers cite security concerns and "lack of integration with existing systems" as cloud showstoppers.

At the end of the day, survey data can help support cloud decisions for either camp, but true motivation to say yes to the cloud will most likely come from something far less predictable and strategic. Over time, economics, reliability, security and mobility of cloud computing will conquer all, so legal might as well buck the "laggard" tag sooner than later. Upward and onward.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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