Integrate ideas

Colin Fowle, managing director of Blue Car Technologies, says there is more than one way to manage business transformation

The challenges to implement new technology at a law firm are many, but the ultimate risk is surely that of failing to see a return on your carefully considered investment. Not only have you lost money, but stakeholders may also be deterred from prioritising similarly important innovation in future. Productivity or efficiency gains, of course, depend on driving maximum – and efficient – adoption by the users your new tool is designed to support. However, the strategising needs to start much earlier in the story than that. Colin Fowle, managing director of Blue Car Technologies, says one of the first tests for a project decision maker is whether to buy something that appears to work, or invest in the skills and time it takes to build it for themselves.

"There will be a line in the ground somewhere, where it's no longer efficient for an organisation to use a pre-packaged product because of the sheer number of potential customisations required to modify it for their many business processes. Firms can pay an awful lot of money for a licence, and then find they need to pay an awful lot more money because it doesn't work for them as it stands."

"So, do you accept a solution may not do absolutely everything you need, or do you invest in an approach that offers more flexibility?" On the other hand, he says, building a solution from scratch can introduce unforeseen problems. "All firms need to do the various sums and make that call for themselves.

"An organisation may tender, and hear back from solutions saying they can match 80%, 60%, or even just 50% of requirements. Some will say they can do it all, and some will offer to build something bespoke. There are certainly plenty of options, but each obviously has a different cost."

Prime to change

You might think that at a time when law firms seem to be realising they need significant

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transformation – both to recruit top talent and retain satisfied clients – the more flexible option would be more likely to come out on top. But the decision will depend, at least in part, on the complexity of the business processes.

For example, the Blue Car Technologies team has worked for organisations such as The Council of Europe, where everything is extremely bespoke: built and tuned internally to integrate with all their other systems.

"A law firm will typically be using a traditional line-of-business application such as a practice or document management system, as they're just so large," explains Fowle. "But in our experience, there is always something that still needs to be changed to make systems A and B work together more effectively and streamline business processes into something more productive." That will usually involve using the APIs of those established vendors' products, he says.

Big common projects for Blue Car right now include integrating both e-signature and digital-dictation processes with the firm's document management system. In August 2016, for example, bringing its integration with DocuSign, the business became an iManage technology partner. In February 2018, this connector also became available for OpenText eDocs, with other DMS vendors to follow.

Developing probems?

But another factor that may feed into choices about technology deployment is the firm's business-services talent strategy. It's especially complicated in IT, says Fowle, by the way software developers tend to prefer to work.

"Developers are determined to be in the right team and environment for them – they always want to be working on the very latest technology, and when it gets too old they can quickly lose interest," he says.

It's a recruitment challenge for firms – because, of course, their primary business simply isn't

software development, he says.

"These people want to be able to benefit from peer reviews, and work with other people who really understand the programming paradigms of the day – all the good things about a software house – and that's difficult in a small IT function, where you're primarily doing point solutions because a partner has requested them."

Left to get on with it, you could perhaps even envisage a really bad case of developer disillusionment becoming a security risk.

Blue Car was recently working alongside developers for one firm, and when that team decided to move on they weren't replaced. As Fowle's business had also been involved, he took on the work instead.

"We can do that, and integrate ourselves well with systems and desktop teams. Or we can develop offsite, and then deploy and collaborate with the internal business analysts on identifying changes and adding functionality." Shared ticketing and code management systems provide open access to all involved in both capturing requirements and implementing updates, he says.

Perhaps, as some firms adopt new innovation setups – both physical hubs and more collaborative resourcing models – to develop technology alongside their clients, the pressure of tech talent on firms might ease?

"It is encouraging, and we'll watch it with interest," says Fowle. "It could make for a group of similarly technology-minded people, who truly put together a new solution.

"However, on the other hand, the reality might be a few key individuals who are good at horizon scanning, before entering an outsourcing arrangement to do the development and bring something back to the market."

From cash to working culture, what's certainly clear is firms need to decide exactly what and who they're prepared to part with in order to make the decision to invest in technology a truly transformational success story.