The knowledge law firms already have, but cannot access

By Dr John Yardley, CEO & Founder at Threads® Software Ltd



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The Solicitors Regulation Authority's updated guidance on effective supervision, published in June following the Mazur judgment, has brought renewed attention to how law firms oversee work and maintain accountability. While the regulatory questions are for legal professionals to interpret, the discussion raises a practical challenge that we, as communications technology providers, encounter regularly: how can firms maintain effective oversight when so much of the information behind client matters remains with individual fee earners?

Law firms generate enormous amounts of knowledge through everyday client interactions, yet much of it is difficult to access beyond the people directly involved. The problem isn't necessarily that information has been lost, but that it exists in conversations, individual inboxes and personal records rather than being readily available to the wider organisation.

The limits of individual knowledge

Consider how much context a solicitor accumulates over the course of a client relationship. Conversations reveal concerns, clarify expectations and explain the reasoning behind decisions. Some of this makes its way into attendance notes and matter files, but much of the wider context remains with the person who handled the conversation.

This arrangement generally works while that individual remains available. Nevertheless, problems can arise when a colleague needs to take over a matter, a supervising partner wants to understand how a decision was reached, or a client contacts the firm while their usual solicitor is absent.

The information may exist somewhere, but finding it can mean searching through emails, reviewing notes or asking colleagues to reconstruct conversations from memory. This not only creates inefficiencies, it also raises questions about how effectively firms can share and supervise the knowledge generated through their work.

Supervision depends on visibility

Effective supervision requires more than reviewing completed documents. Supervisors need sufficient understanding of how matters are progressing, what clients have been told and whether emerging issues require attention.

A supervisor cannot reasonably be expected to participate in every client conversation. Nor should technology be viewed as a substitute for professional judgement or regular discussion between colleagues. However, making relevant communications more accessible can provide useful additional context, particularly when reviewing complex matters or supporting less experienced fee earners.

The objective should not be to monitor every conversation, but to ensure that important information does not remain unnecessarily isolated.

From individual knowledge to collective intelligence

There is also a wider opportunity beyond supervision. Law firms generate considerable knowledge through their daily interactions, but much of it is difficult to reuse because it exists across separate emails, telephone conversations and individual records.

Collective intelligence is the idea that organisations can make better use of what their people know when information becomes accessible beyond the individual who originally acquired it.

For law firms, this could mean making it easier to understand the history of a client relationship, identify relevant discussions or provide continuity when responsibility for a matter changes.

Technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), natural language processing (NLP) and Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) are beginning to make this more practical. Searchable call transcripts, for example, can make spoken information easier to locate and reference alongside other matter records. But accessibility must be balanced with confidentiality, appropriate permissions and the professional obligations governing client information.

Making better use of what firms already know

Much of the discussion around legal technology focuses on generating new insights through artificial intelligence. There may be just as much value in making better use of the information firms already possess.

Before investing in increasingly sophisticated tools, firms should consider how effectively their existing knowledge is captured, organised and shared. Where information remains fragmented, even the most advanced technology may struggle to deliver its full potential.

The next significant improvement in legal productivity may not come from generating more information, but from making existing knowledge easier to find and use. For firms, that represents an opportunity to strengthen supervision, improve continuity and build a more complete understanding of the work already taking place across their organisation.

Dr John Yardley is CEO and Founder at Threads Software Ltd, which develops Cloud systems for the sharing digital communications and extracting knowledge from within. An intrinsic part of this is the transcription of the human voice into text.



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