



WEDLAKE BELL JUNE 2003



TOTALSPEECH DIGITAL DICTATION CASE STUDY SERIES – (1) WEDLAKE BELL

DIGITAL DICTATION - HOW DID WE MANAGE WITHOUT IT?

Award winning IT journalist and industry commentator Charles Christian has been following developments in the legal technology market since the late 1970s, in this case study he looks at the way Covent Garden-based Wedlake Bell approached some of the management issues associated with the firm's recent implementation of BigHand's TotalSpeech digital dictation system...

Although digital dictation is currently one of the hottest technologies in the legal IT sector, there still remain a lot of concerns about the tangible benefits of these systems, such as how do you measure the return on investment and what the impact is likely to be on the traditional fee earner/secretary working practices. For example, how can secretaries turn around dictation if they do not have access to the fee earners' hard copy files? Recently I had the opportunity to discuss these issues with some of the partners and staff of Wedlake Bell. The firm, a corporate law firm with a large private client practice, has a total personnel of 157 (37 partners, 45 fee earners, 35 secretaries and 40 support staff - the last group also including a wordprocessing department) and completed the roll out BigHand's award winning TotalSpeech system to the firm in October 2002.

We started by talking to Linda Williams, the firm's Finance Director, about the business case for digital dictation. According to Williams, after an extensive review of the options - considering everything from remaining with analogue tape through to moving to speech recognition - it was apparent that digital dictation offered a way of getting work done faster without having to increase the head count. An added factor here was that the firm's existing analogue machines were not only getting old and due for replacement but also costing around £10,000 a year on routine expenditure alone, so it made even more sense to move to a new technology.

At the time of our meeting Wedlake Bell had not been through a summer holidays season, which always puts pressure on staff resources, never the less Williams had no doubt that the introduction of TotalSpeech had already realised savings by cutting back on the number of temps and floats the firm had to use, as well as the amount of overtime being worked by the 'late' secretary (who provides evening cover). Adding together all the various savings and improvements in efficiency, Williams believed the system would pay for itself within 12 months.



WEDLAKE BELL

JUNE 2003



Over in Human Resources, the firm's head of HR Nicola Wright said that there had been some worries internally - including an initial misapprehension that the firm was installing a speech recognition system that would make secretaries redundant. However these vanished once BigHand began holding a series of lunchtime presentations to explain what digital dictation technology was all about and how exactly it was distinct.

Any further reservations were removed when Wedlake Bell began a six-month trial of TotalSpeech in its Property Group. According to the firm's Head of IT Linda Webster "the initial presentations were the key to getting the buy-in from everyone. Without it you are doomed but once the secretaries here realised they were not going to be out of a job, the problem just disappeared. Training was very easy and within two days of the pilot starting, secretaries were telling me 'don't even think of taking it away.' It was an instant hit."

The pilot also gave the firm the opportunity to compare and contrast TotalSpeech with a well-known rival digital dictation system. Said Webster "We did not want to find ourselves backing the wrong option in a VHS versus Betamax situation however it was TotalSpeech that did everything we required and we particularly like the clarity of its clean, simple to use, uncluttered interface, which was also a bonus when it came to training."

During the pilot, Webster's IT team also took the opportunity to benchmark some of the technical aspects of the BigHand system. The fact it runs on SQL Server "was another benefit" but what really impressed Webster was the relatively small file size of the TotalSpeech dictation files and the minimal impact it had on the firm's network. This was a particular concern, as the firm plans to move into new offices next year and did not want to have to upgrade the capacity of the network for the period remaining in its present offices.

According to Webster, the system virtually "runs itself" - an opinion echoed by Linda Williams who reckons the TotalSpeech implementation was "the smoothest IT rollout, with the least complaints, we have seen." Webster adds that it was nice to be involved in a project that was popular with everyone. So just what was it about TotalSpeech that proved so popular?

Perhaps the biggest impact has been its ability to allow secretaries to better organise and prioritise their workloads. Nicola Wright said that with the old system, secretaries' spirits would sink when they saw a fresh pile of files and tapes landing on their desk, as they had no idea whether they were looking at a few minutes or several hours of



WEDLAKE BELL

JUNE 2003



dictation. But now, they can immediately see which items have priority and how long they are likely to take to deal with.

Wright added that although the firm has always been organised around departmental teams of secretaries, the introduction of digital dictation has helped promote work sharing across the firm generally. "With tape, no-one wanted to touch another secretary's tape in case it was a major project, but now if someone has five minutes to spare, someone in another department will happily transcribe a quick attendance note or fax. The net result is most secretaries can clear their in-box by the end of the day whereas previously this was rarely the case."

Emma Iles, who heads the Property Group's secretarial team - and has been using TotalSpeech for probably longer than anyone else in the firm, agrees. "You can plan your day better, because you can clearly see what work you have to get through. It cuts back on the amount of times you need to work late and probably 90 percent of the time you can go home with a clear desk." Iles added that other benefits of digital dictation are the far clearer sound quality and none of the "muddle" you used to get with tapes. "I cannot imagine going back to tape - in fact I cannot believe how we managed before."

But what about the paper files? At Wedlake Bell, in common with most firms using analogue dictation, the way fee earners traditionally operated was to take a completed tape, along with the physical file, out to the secretary who was to transcribe it. With digital dictation however, because the dictation goes out across a network, so it can be transcribed by someone located in a different part of the building - in Wedlake Bell, for example, different departments are located on different floors - this connection is lost. So how would the firm cope?

Peter Day, the head of the Property Group, said that most fee earners were worried at the outset how secretaries transcribing the dictation would get over the problem of access to the files, "but within days of the pilot commencing everyone was happy with the new way of working." In fact Day reckoned the pilot showed "it was a bit of a myth" that secretaries needed the file in order to transcribe any dictation, not least because the firm also runs a document management system (iManage) which provides access to most of the information stored in the file anyway. This view, incidentally, is widely shared throughout the firm, Linda Webster in IT also commented that "the issue of file access simply never materialised as the problem everyone thought it would be."



*Peter Day: physical file
objection is a myth*

As a partner, Day has an interest in the business benefits of digital dictation, one of which has been a general increase in productivity. "We pride ourselves on our speed of response, on both non-urgent as well as urgent work. TotalSpeech has helped us to turn work around more quickly because it allows us to prioritise properly." Another bonus Day has observed is that digital dictation is more efficient as "we are not having to scabble around for blank tapes, which can be incredibly irritating, or trying to remember what we said when a tape has broken half way through transcription. While this may not seem much by itself, if every fee earner can save just a few minutes of time each day, across the whole firm over the course of a year, this does add up."

The final comment, which probably best summarises the firm's experiences with BigHand, came from Wedlake Bell's Managing Partner Julian Cuppage, when he said: "Quite often a new IT project is painful. Training is always a big issue and there will be a whole range of gripes to deal with. TotalSpeech was something that worked immediately. When we did the pilot we liked it instantly. And when we rolled it out to the whole firm, even the most conservative fee earners adopted it without batting an eyelid.

"The introduction of digital dictation really has encouraged the team spirit. Secretaries now see themselves as working for the firm rather than just their bit of it. It has made us more efficient - we could certainly take on more work and handle it with our existing resources. And I would certainly recommend other solicitors to use it - it is one of those developments that once you have it you wonder how you ever managed without it."

By Charles Christian

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