

PROOF POSITIVE

Anthony Vigneron, applications director at Clifford Chance, says the document proofreading process was a key beneficiary of the firm's investment in the principles of continuous improvement

In 2014, Clifford Chance announced that it would be training all its lawyers in the principles of continuous improvement (CI) – an acknowledgment that you can attempt to understand even the most complex pieces of legal work as a process which can be made more efficient over time.

One fairly obvious place to start would be the way documents are quality-stamped as fit for purpose – a source of productivity gains if it can be safely accelerated, but of course also a source of risk if embarrassing (or even case-critical) errors get through undetected.

Clifford Chance applications director Anthony Vigneron says: "Standard document production processes just aren't all that stable. Poor errors mean at the very least a lot of rework, and sometimes even corrupted and lost documents."

So, the firm ran "quite an extensive

continuous improvement project," settling on this particular process as a key one to fix, he says.

"We wanted to investigate how we could avoid that waste of effort. It's time we were wasting, but in our profession any loss of time immediately hits profitability – and may even mean small additional costs for the client."

This was all some time before the firm launched its Lean-themed CI training – not to mention the arrival of a range of 'robots' on to the market to deal with documents that much faster – but one thing uncovered by Vigneron's assessment of inefficiencies was that technology would play a part in the transformation.

Killing Time

In the event, this meant the implementation of Contract Companion – the latest in a suite of products from Litera Microsystems focused on improving

document quality.

"It's a tool that helps the lawyer by identifying any mistakes in the first place, but it also fixes those errors faster than you would otherwise – editing out common inaccuracies like numbering and cross-references." Ultimately this means you're more rapidly passing through the different phases of drafting work.

Rather like the new breed of artificial intelligence systems that are replacing certain phases of due diligence or document review, Vigneron says the Litera Microsystems tool will also scan external information sources to identify possible words or phrases that "just don't look quite right" by comparison.

"The latest statistics we have show that fee earners are saving around an hour every week, solely in proofreading time. When you multiply that by the number of people who are still working with hourly rates, it's

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– Anthony Vigneron - Clifford Chance Applications Director

quite a significant number for us.

“And it isn’t just an internal saving. It has an impact on the turnaround time for sending these documents to clients.” Critically, that’s also work that has now been effectively vetted against a clear threshold of quality, so ought to be good for client satisfaction levels.

As documents are increasingly filed around on a multitude of devices as well as from the desktop, another Litera Microsystems tool – 3BClean Server – strips out unwanted metadata from attachments. There are options for complying with, or overriding, policies such as the removal of tracked changes, for example.

“That’s just sitting there quietly in the background, but it does another important risk management job every time someone sends a client an email,” says Vigneron. “It’s all about getting the cleanest, most professional version of the document possible.”

All in it Together

However, as well as reducing errors and rework, there’s another continuous improvement principle at work in Clifford Chance’s choice of Litera Microsystems as a partner – the avoidance of unnecessary complexity.

“We didn’t want the fee earners to be distracted by new technology,” says Vigneron. “In the past, you’d need to implement different parts of different products to benefit from different features. But for efficient working you really don’t want to be jumping in and out of applications for the same document or matter and saving work in multiple formats.

“It’s not the only one, but one benefit of the Litera Microsystems solutions is that you effectively have a single ecosystem for anything you might need to do in the document’s lifecycle.

“We ran a proof of concept that put four vendors’ software into the hands of users, and the vast majority picked this product. That must say something for its ease of use. There were no IT people involved.

“Another advantage is that it can do different things for the firm’s different groups of people, such as back office and fee earners. Not everyone needs to go into the same expert analytical depth to benefit from productivity and quality improvements within the scope of their role.”

Indeed, another CI metric is the number of documents lawyers need to refer up for another level of proofreading before passing.

“We can review how many requests the expert team is dealing with each day, or month, and what that amounts to in overall workload,” says Vigneron. “We’re currently putting that measurement process in place, but it should reduce the overall time again quite dramatically.”

Not that this means any more time off for the lawyers, he says. “There’s an obvious saving for the client, but to be frank the internal productivity improvements go back into helping people to meet, or exceed, personal revenue targets.”

But as a result, the usual post-pilot user adoption challenges simply didn’t apply. “As the tools remove lower-value activities from the day job, it has been really easy to get buy in and bed down,” he explains. “These tools are marketed directly at the partners anyway, and there was a really big pull from the end users.

“Unusually, I had users in my own team chasing to ensure we signed the contract as quickly as possible. In document production that isn’t something you see very often.”

About Litera Microsystems

Litera Microsystems is the leading provider of software for drafting, proofreading, comparing, repairing and cleaning documents in the legal and life sciences industries worldwide.

Our core products empower users to generate, review, and distribute high-quality content quickly and securely, from any device.

Today, Litera Microsystems supports thousands of document-intensive organizations across the globe, helping them satisfy the complex demands of clients and regulators.