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Getting back to basics



Voicemail was supposed to ease the burden on secretaries so that they could concentrate their efforts on other fee generating tasks, but a recent survey shows it has not worked out like that, writes Milan Zala

More than 15 years ago, firms were plagued by the problem of trying to increase revenues and reduce the administration on fee earners and support staff at the same time. In relation to call management, it was envisaged that voicemail and DDI systems would provide the ideal solution by capturing all client calls and freeing up secretarial time from answering calls and message taking to fee generating tasks — that is, focusing on document production. But the reality 15 years on is far from this fairytale existence.

With the advent of the communication revolution came a new set of problems — voicemail became impersonal and phone rage is rearing its ugly head. Industry surveys confirmed this picture. From a client or customer perspective, 75% of callers hang up when they get through to a voicemail message or get an engaged tone. But it does not stop there.

Outcom, a communications company designed for the professional marketplace, undertook a recent survey of law firms and found the results quite staggering. More than 82% of firms in the poll admitted that their voicemail systems were not delivering results. Among the issues were that messages were simply not being left and fee earners were not using the system because it was too time-consuming and complicated to operate. Furthermore, in excess of 33% of firms could not answer all their calls.

The result: firms seem to be stepping backwards towards the pre-voicemail era, with secretarial staff continuing to take messages. But surely this was the whole purpose of voicemail in the first place — to do away with the costly administrative exercise of answering calls. What is even more surprising is that the larger law firms seem to be in a hybrid state — fee earners using voicemail, with secretarial staff also taking messages. Not only does voicemail add another layer of administration to fee earners' time (rather than take it away), it is actually costing firms dearly through lost chargeable time.

Industry figures suggest that it takes, on average, 90 seconds to retrieve each voicemail message depending on the length, the time to access the system and the lost concentration time. If a fee earner retrieves 10 voicemail messages a day, this could take about 15 minutes out of their time on administration. The end result is valuable time being taken away from client and, hence, chargeable work. One only has to add in the chargeable rates and the number of employees to see the true value of the fee income being wasted on a daily basis. Now think of it annually.

What about secretaries taking messages? Well, they waste a minimum of one hour a day answering calls and taking messages, if you consider that each secretary works for an average of three fee earners. Multiply that by the number of secretaries over a year and you have a considerable amount of time spent away from fee generating activities.

Client satisfaction is also topping the agenda. With anything between 10 and 40 seconds before you can even get to leave a message, is it any wonder that law firms are missing calls as clients get dissatisfied with

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having to wait so long before leaving a message? Also, the messages conveyed in some voicemail recordings again seem to defy any logic. If a client reaches a recording, they know the person is not available and, therefore, does not need to be reminded in the message, leading to increased frustration. The daily practice of some fee earners to leave a voicemail recording concerning their movements that day also seems, in some cases, nonsensical.

Wasn't the purpose of voicemail to avoid all this and reduce administration? And how do you measure return on investment on the implementation of voicemail against this background?

But there is an answer to this problem. As a former City corporate lawyer who has encountered all these problems first hand, I believe that firms should turn the issue on its head and should seriously consider outsourcing their call management functions to third-party providers.

These companies can provide a flexible, dedicated professional answering service in the name of the firm to capture all calls, with messages delivered directly to the individual desktop, thus bypassing both voicemail and secretaries altogether to improve productivity, profitability and client relations without huge infrastructure costs.

With the amount of fee earning time that is freed up, firms can easily recoup their costs within months (as opposed to years). Some firms could even start thinking about adopting a policy to charge clients for any messages taken: after all, they are already charging for photocopying as a matter of policy.

Although this may seem a bit unorthodox, it is not without precedence today. There are many examples of City firms doing just that in respect of a number of their functions — from document management (including reprographics and mailroom), right through to outsourcing of accounts and case management. With the return on investments that could be achieved, it looks like many firms are joining the bandwagon of outsourcing their non-core operations — in fact, a number have recently been announced in various trade publications.

Whereas voicemail was supposed to increase efficiency and productivity by allowing staff to focus on client work, it has ended up adding a further layer of administration than existed at the start of the revolution. So much so that, increasingly, clients are being charged for a fee earner's administration than actual client work. Certainly, this administration is supposed to be catered for in the target hours for fee earners — that is, 6.5 hours a day. But if you reduced the administration element would you not increase the chargeable element?

So how are managers responding? Increasing numbers of firms are reviewing their call management and voicemail systems for live message taking against their review of the traditional role of the secretary in relation to the global nature of the economy and the new technological era, where speed of document production and getting deals done is everything.

Some firms are also redefining the traditional secretarial structure by splitting roles into document secretaries and PA secretaries, increasing the possibility for outsourcing their call management. Outcom's survey revealed that 68% of firms would seriously consider outsourcing their call management function.

What is interesting is how firms are moving into the more integrated client-facing business processes of their practices and are using technology and communication spends to help them outsource non-core business processes.

With practice partners and managers alike searching for tangible return on investment through new processes to save valuable administration time for the workforce, could voicemail become a thing of the past?

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