

Briefing

THE PEOPLE ISSUE
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The Interview
Andrew Darwin

DLA Piper's international COO on a global vision for legal business

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Briefing Industry Interview

Power in numbers

Dan Wales at BIPB Legal looks into a future where law firms mine information about everything they do

Dan Wales, legal business manager for BIPB Legal, wants to turn all your information into pictures – because that’s what we understand, and what we understand can be turned into action.

In many ways this issue of **Briefing** is about creating more ‘joined-up’ firms, but that has to start somewhere – somewhere more metaphysical. “Firms hold a lot of information, but departments don’t share it internally as much as they should. Finance doesn’t talk to marketing, marketing doesn’t talk to HR, and so on. So when it comes to pitching and talking

to clients, a firm will have one set of statistics from one area and another area’s view will be completely different. That’s just not a coherent way to go about business,” says Wales.

“One of the key things we’ll be looking at over the next few years is master data management – moving the information from those repositories into a firm-wide repository. Then we need to present it in a better way.”

The big challenge is where data comes from and its nature – that determines its usefulness. Wales says he sees the world of law firm information in three divisions:

unstructured data, structured data and data in context. When it comes to structured data, says Wales, “law firms are only just starting to embrace intelligence on it”. But mining the knowledge, the business intelligence, of data in context and unstructured data (stuff that’s floating about or hasn’t been set up for reporting and measurement; or information that could benefit from being contextualised) could be a huge potential benefit to firms, he says. ‘Context intelligence’ can help people find information, knowledge, about a client or a matter or a person in the firm without the route to that information having been set up in advance, or without even some of the key data being available.

This informational blurring also blurs the lines between finance, finance systems, knowledge and marketing/BD, says Wales. “The majority of the projects will either start from a financial or CRM perspective, but we’re trying to change that. Business intelligence spans the business – knowledge management, HR and so on. Wherever there is information, regardless of whether it’s numerical or it’s text, you can present that information in a meaningful, visual way.”

Wales wants us to see this presenting of everything as ‘data-driven discovery’, rather than business intelligence, because “regardless of what type of information it is, you’re discovering the information you’ve got that’s going to enable you to make business critical decisions. That’s the bit that’s missing”.

“We’re trying to streamline this and bring it to a single repository so you can look at a client not only through a financial lens but also everything they’ve done recently, all recent transactions and interactions within the KM system, key contact points – it becomes a complete life story for any query. It’s really not as difficult to do this now – it’s a far cry from the pain of data warehousing.”

Visual presentation of data will become a far more prevalent way to understand data in 2014, says Wales. This is, it seems, highly likely to be true – just look at the now almost ubiquitous use of infographics to present almost any information, for example, to see how much more useful people find it. Here’s another example: most practice and case management providers have created and are expanding significantly their use of ‘dashboards’ to visually present data to users.

“The mind recognises visual indicators a lot quicker than it does reams and reams of numbers. There’s now so much information about that if you have it in a spreadsheet or a linear format, it’s going to take you a long time to root out the information that you need. Visually, the answer’s staring you in the face.”

This change, says Wales, is going to match many firms’ journeys to becoming much more corporate, both in outlook and structure. “Firms now want to manage like a corporate does, with proper profitability analysis and internal management hierarchy. We’re also seeing people coming into legal with corporate experience and familiarity with corporate toolsets, business intelligence being one of them.”

Getting all the information across the firm joined up is, now, easier than it ever was, says Wales, and it’s going to be essential for growing and merging firms – so, the majority of the top 100 over the next few years, then. “Firms are just starting to appreciate the benefits that business intelligence and visual data discovery can bring to them, but the challenge is turning that vision into a usable reality.”

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