

**Law firms are increasingly embracing the Internet as a way of accessing a variety of popular legal applications says Dominic Cullis, Chairman of the Legal Software Suppliers Association (LSSA). But what are the benefits – and drawbacks – of this kind of technology?**

The concept of deploying software over the Internet has grabbed the attention of the legal sector. Increasingly, law firms are adopting this Internet-centric model to offload the burden of server maintenance and data backup, whilst expanding access to their IT systems. While some firms might remain sceptical of this new technology and question a third-party's ability to safeguard client data, members of the Legal Software Suppliers Association (LSSA) remain confident in their software's ability to keep data safe, secure and accessible.

To understand what Web-based software is, it's useful to see how it differs from traditional software deployment models. Some firms may have heard Web-based software described as "Software as a Service" (SaaS, typically pronounced 'sass') or "browser software", but there is still some confusion over how these Web-based models differ from a traditional IT system.

In fact, the difference is clear. With traditional "off-the-shelf" software packages, the software is normally installed on a server, and then on each computer in the office. The server hardware is located in the firm's own office and is accessed on the PCs used by solicitors and their staff. Typically, the software is purchased up front, although there may be an annual support fee to cover upgrades and customer support services.

With this model, each application needs to be separately installed on each user's PC. Any upgrade to the application would therefore also require an upgrade to the software on each user workstation, adding to support costs and potentially harming productivity.

With the SaaS model, however, data is typically secured at a central location, and then monitored by IT staff that handle routine back-ups, upgrades, modifications, installations and necessary maintenance. As such, the security and maintenance is often far superior to what a law firm could implement in its own office. Not only that, but using SaaS in this way also means that there is no need for the firm to buy expensive server hardware.

Osprey.TM, the software produced by LSSA member Pracctice, is a Web-based software package designed specifically for law firms. After more than 20 years of supplying software to the legal market, Pracctice originally released Osprey.TM at the London Legal IT exhibition back in February 2004. As such, Osprey.TM was the first full function, purely Internet-based Practice Management System to be released to the UK legal market.

"Without a doubt, Web-based software can provide a low cost, future-proof tool for law firms that will deliver huge returns on a small investment, and therefore provide considerable savings," says Matthew Lancaster, Marketing Director for Osprey.TM. "With Web-based applications, lawyers within the firm simply access the system through their Web browsers [such as Internet Explorer], via a broadband Internet connection."

With this model, the firm will typically pay a monthly subscription fee to use the service, rather than purchase the software up front.

"The traditional advantages of Web-based applications are geared around ease and consistency of access, and negating the requirement for firms to have their own in-house IT infrastructure," agrees Darren Gower, marketing manager at LSSA member Eclipse Legal Systems. Eclipse Legal Systems has a SaaS offering which provides the full functionality of its 'traditional' installed solution. Data can be hosted by the client, or by Eclipse, whichever is preferable.

Pinpoint Interactive, from LSSA member Quill, offers another example of powerful legal software that can be accessed from an ordinary Web browser. Pinpoint provides a true Web-browser based, hosted application to assist with practices' financial and document management needs. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, Quill also offers the legal cashier to drive it, which means that firms don't have to recruit, train or retain a legal cashier of their own.

"With Pinpoint Interactive, we wanted to develop a totally mobile, zero deployment, zero cost application and solution for our clients," says Quill's Andrew Sherwin. Being "lean and mean", Pinpoint Interactive can be accessed from any web enabled PC, whether Windows, MAC or Linux, using almost any Internet browser from Internet Explorer, Firefox, Safari or Mozilla and now even Google Chrome."

With purely Web-based software, neither data nor the applications are kept on the actual PC, so solicitors don't have to install anything to use it. As a result, there is no need to worry about installation going wrong. At the same time, there can't be incompatibilities between the application and the PC's operating system, because the software doesn't actually run on the PC's operating system.

LSSA member IRIS is another company that has embraced this vision of "your data anywhere, anytime". IRIS offers its clients two alternative delivery mechanisms: traditional software installed within the practice, or software hosted on IRIS' own servers. IRIS recently signed its 1,000th hosted customer, and offers hosted solutions for both solicitors and barristers.

"Web-based software has clear business benefits for firms: there is no need to worry about maintaining local IT infrastructure and applying upgrades, so there are cost savings in both staff time and materials costs," says Paul Heritage-Redpath, Product Manager, IRIS. "In addition, the new version of the Law Society's Lexcel quality standard mandates a business continuity plan, and Web-based software has obvious advantages if premises become inaccessible."

Disaster Recovery plans are important to all industries, but particularly the legal sector, and Web-based software caters for this need very well. As all client data is stored "server side", business continuity and disaster recovery play a big part in making the software especially attractive to law firms.

In addition, the ability to update and maintain Web-based applications without having to distribute and install software on potentially thousands of individual PCs is yet another key reason for their popularity. Likewise, Web-based applications require little or no disk space on the user's own PC (or the firm's server), and will often upgrade automatically when new features become available. This added flexibility has further knock-on

benefits for law firms in terms of the software's reliability, according to Osprey.TM's Matthew Lancaster.

"With Web-based applications, upgrades only have to be tested in the one environment where they would run (in the data centres), and do not have to be distributed," he explains. "Upgrades are instantaneous, can be applied much more easily, and are produced much more frequently as a result of the greatly reduced testing period. We offer both hosted and self-hosted services, yet 99.9% of our customers choose our hosted services."

So, is SaaS right for your firm? The short answer is: it depends.

"Law firms are far from homogenous, so it is difficult to generalise," says Paul Heritage-Redpath from IRIS. "There may be some firms with a cultural aversion to having their data held outside their four walls, and for this reason IRIS offer customers the choice. Having said that, we've worked very hard to make our software fast to deploy and easy to use; offering it on a hosted platform just means there are no physical hardware issues for start-up firms to tackle, so they can open their doors for business almost immediately."

"When it comes to Web-based applications, there is a lot to consider," adds Eclipse Legal Systems' Darren Gower. "The security and longevity of your provider, for a start: who is actually hosting your data and is this ideal? Is there the potential for a conflict of interests? Also, making changes and amendments to the system can be more difficult given the 'remote' nature of the source. Not only that, but if your Internet connection drops, then the system will be totally unavailable."

While the SaaS model is very compelling, there are several reasons why a firm might not want to implement a SaaS system.

"The main disadvantage with browser based applications is the look and feel can sometimes be a little flat compared to the interface of traditional Windows applications," says Andrew Sherwin from Quill. "However, technology is moving forward in leaps and bounds at the moment, with applications such as Microsoft Silverlight and Adobe Air giving suppliers the ability to develop much richer user interfaces without compromising on the core benefits of web browser applications."

Paul Heritage-Redpath from IRIS qualifies that statement. "Web-based applications provide a very different user experience to that afforded by a rich desktop client, and attempting to replicate the desktop experience could lead to reliance on proprietary third party extensions with the obvious risks to future stability that poses," he says. "IRIS' vision is to re-imagine the fee earner desktop to take best advantage of the browser user interface, and ensure that our software remains standards-based so that it can run on any platform or device our clients choose."

The need for complex customisation can also cause problems. Because Web-based systems are typically designed to serve numerous offices from a single, centralised location, there have traditionally been fewer options for complex customisation. This, however, is already changing as vendors like Practice develop more advanced configuration capabilities.

Last but by no means least is the issue of security; when it comes to Internet technology, concerns in this area are common. The Web Application Security Consortium (WASC) has therefore been developed with the intention of documenting how to avoid security problems in web applications, and some software vendors will also use a web application security scanner, which is specialised software for detecting security problems in web applications.

Likewise, as the UK industry body for legal systems developers and vendors, the LSSA recently announced that it has revised its Code of Practice with regard to the provision of hosted services, as well as the safety and integrity of customers' data. In particular, where services are supplied by means of a hosted service, the Code of Practice now states that all LSSA members must take all reasonable precautions to ensure the safety and integrity of their customers' data.

"If using Web-based software, it's important for the client to understand how the data is transmitted to the host server and back again to the PC, where the hosted data is, and what should happen in the event of the hosted server being unavailable," says Quill's Andrew Sherwin. "The minimum a client should expect is Industry standard SSL 128bit encryption for data transfer. We explain to our clients that Internet security and data transfer should be considered as a partnership with the supplier and not simply a one way obligation from the supplier to the practice. As such, we advise all our clients on what we describe as 'best practice' for data transmission using Internet technologies."

"Some clients still have concerns about a third-party hosting their data, but the fact is that suppliers are much better placed to ensure the security of clients' data," adds Matthew Lancaster. "Due to the economies of scale in providing the service for hundreds of firms, suppliers in this area have the considerable experience, resource, expertise and funding to apply far higher levels of protection than any individual law firm could achieve. All you need to do is consider the amount of money spent by one law firm on its firewall, and compare that to a supplier who is providing a hosted service for hundreds of firms."

Many would argue that security is actually enhanced by the Web-based model, in that sensitive data is not being stored on a laptop or USB drive that can easily be lost or stolen. Likewise, companies offering Web-based applications will often be more diligent about backing up data, as they'll have dedicated system administrators to manage the process.

"Security is probably the primary concern when it comes to any kind of online services," says IRIS' Paul Heritage-Redpath. "It's important, though, to keep this in perspective – one need only think of taking files to court, or putting them in the car to work on at home to appreciate that the risk of data loss has always been with the profession."

Despite such concerns, the concept of Web-based software is proving to be compelling for many law firms. After all, most solicitors have now become accustomed to having access to their email regardless of where they are working. And if they can see their email, why not their diary? If they can discuss a document with their colleagues, why can't they make changes to it? As a result, many solicitors have begun to question the logic of having their data trapped on a stand-alone computer somewhere.

"Our legal clients like the fact that they can access the system from home, from court, or from the office," says Andrew Sherwin from Quill. "Plus, they don't have to tell us if they

buy a new PC or laptop in order to get the application reinstalled. They can simply access our software – and their data – from a new PC straight away."

As a result of this new way of thinking, some industry experts are predicting that the whole idea of "your computer" is disappearing, and being replaced with "your data." You should be able to get at your data from any computer or other device, whether that means a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) or your mobile phone.

"We are totally committed to this vision, and find ourselves in a position to be able to offer established systems and services to legal practices," Andrew Sherwin adds. "We firmly believe that the way that practices interact with their suppliers, their clients, and regulatory authorities will change in the future, and there is little doubt in our minds the Internet will be the hub of this change."