

# What you get is what you see

James Evers

When Robert Ishak and Bill Petrovski mapped out the vision for their law firm, William Roberts (their first names), the key question they asked was: If I were a corporate client, what would I want?

The answer, Ishak says, was transparency.

"But this means whole transparency, or 'Show me your file,'" Ishak says. "It was much easier for us to do starting with a blank canvas than it is for a major law firm to go back and change things."

When William Roberts creates or receives an important document, it is scanned immediately and made available for the client to view via a web-based interface. Clients use a Google-like search function to find what they need; pleadings, file notes, letters and accounts are all made available at any time of the day or night.

Ishak says the firm's insurance clients keep a close watch on the progress of key matters and have conducted random audits on bills. So far, there have been no surprises.

"Over the past three years, the demands from the insurance market has changed. Clients are becoming more sophisticated," he says. "They have increased what is required from the law firm, especially in terms of reporting."

He has observed other law firms' reporting systems that involve the manual input of data from client files into spreadsheets to provide client updates.

"What we have is everything electronic," Ishak says. "Not only do we give them access [to the system], but we give them links to Austlii [Australasian Legal Information Institute] and parliamentary legislation."

"So if I cite a section in my advice and they want to read the whole of the section, they go straight to it. It is about making things easier for the client."



Robert Ishak and Bill Petrovski give clients access to their web interface as well as links to Austlii and legislation.

Photo: JIM RICE

The approach also makes things cheaper. Ishak says the traditional process of preparing a legal letter — dictation, word processing, the solicitor making amendments, the typist making those amendments, then the solicitor signing off — "adds cost at every stage, but once you get the technology, the processes and the systems right, we can focus on what we do best: advising on the law and appearing in court".

William Roberts opened for business in Sydney in July 2005 and was built on insurance work. Ishak says the firm's low overheads allowed it to compete in a tough market. It now offers a broad range of commercial advice and has recently begun examining class actions.

The use of technology has not

only allowed William Roberts to create sophisticated reporting systems, but also to synthesise what can be complex and confusing information when briefing counsel.

"William Roberts have used technology not for its own sake but to convey complex information concisely and accurately," says Sydney barrister Michael Lee, who has been briefed by the firm several times.

The firm has 15 professional staff and is looking for five more. Ishak says that when he talks to young lawyers about their experiences being interviewed by large firms, he is "surprised that other firms don't ask technical questions. I will ask about the Evidence Act, I will ask about the latest case law on particular areas — and I will expect a

response. The typical response is, 'I didn't know I had to answer legal questions'.

"But sometimes the legal knowledge isn't there."

One of William Roberts's major insurance clients recently awarded it a corporate responsibility and sustainability award.

This was based in part on its adoption of "green" principles, including using public transport when attending court and encouraging the receipt of files electronically.

Ishak says "going green saves the practice money".

"It saves on printing costs, paper costs, shredding costs, secure paper disposal costs," he says.

"It is not entirely for altruistic purposes."

## Family law courses help new arrivals

Alex Boxsell

Judges are often criticised for being out of touch with the broader community. But the Family Court of Australia has been doing its bit to reverse that perception by meeting with some of the newest Australians in an effort to shed light on the vagaries of the law.

With funding from the former federal Department of Immigration and Citizenship, the Family Court is running community-based education sessions about family law for recent immigrants from a select number of African and Middle Eastern countries.

The program, a first by any court in Australia, has been met with the approval of courts in other jurisdictions, along with a visiting delegation of judges and administrators from Indonesia.

The method of education varies, from instructing bilingual community representatives to broader courses involving the police and human services departments.

After releasing a report on the program this week, the Family Court's Chief Justice, Diana Bryant, said it was aimed at communities with the briefest history here — Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq.

### The program has won the approval of courts in other jurisdictions.

"They say we have a plethora of laws, and there was obviously quite a confusion, particularly with family law, between state and federal jurisdiction," she said. "Many of them are asylum seekers who have been the subject of discrimination by police, regimes and courts, and so they are also quite nervous about authority figures."

That distrust quickly broke down once they had spent time with the court's staff and local police. One ambitious individual went so far as to model a judge's wig while sitting behind the bench.

Chief Justice Bryant said previous attempts to build an understanding of the law through brochures distributed at a time of legal crisis were not proving successful.

"This was different. We wanted to find a way of engaging with the communities before they have to come to court, to find some one way of educating them about the processes," she said.

For Chief Justice Bryant, who awarded certificates to those who took part in the program, it was a humbling experience.

"Some of the older people had held quite significant positions in their country," she said. "There was an academic, one had been a cabinet minister in the Sudan. These were people who had been in refugee camps and then came to Australia for a completely different life."

## NSW planning to exclude lawyers

Alex Boxsell

Lawyers fear the NSW government will lock them out of parts of the development process, despite last-minute changes to three new bills unveiled in parliament last week.

Lawyers are concerned NSW Planning Minister Frank Sartor is rushing through what would be the biggest planning reforms since the current legislation began in 1979.

The reforms champion the use of a government-appointed Planning Assessment Commission (PAC) and Joint Regional Planning Panels (JRPP) to hear applications on the development of major projects. These panels will be staffed by ministerial appointees.

Mr Sartor said last week the reforms would make the planning system more transparent, efficient and cheap.

Allens Arthur Robinson planning partner Paul Lalich said that when

the PAC held a public hearing, there would be no right of appeal to the Land & Environment Court.

Similar provisions restricting legal representation might also apply to the JRPP and Independent Hearing and Assessment Panels.

The new bill provided that regulations — expected to be released in June — might also restrict lawyers from representing clients before the new panels, even though clients could be asked to give evidence or produce documents, Mr Lalich said.

Gadens environment partner Anthony Whealy said until the regulations were released, doubt remained over the extent of lawyers' exclusion.

But Mr Lalich said many in the profession inferred from the legislation that the government viewed lawyers as obstacles to, rather than facilitators of, dispute resolution.

"Planning disputes almost always involve resolution of questions of

law. Parties should be able to be legally represented in these circumstances," he said.

"Lawyers appearing for parties before the panel would assist in the resolution of issues at the panel stage, and make the process more efficient and cost effective."

Mr Sartor has painted the reforms as necessary to reduce the burden of

### Planning disputes almost always involve resolution of questions of law.

Paul Lalich,  
Allens Arthur Robinson

legal costs on clients, while saying "lawyers are not the problem".

Mr Whealy said Mr Sartor had indicated lawyers would be excluded from the largest and smallest planning processes, decided by the PAC and planning

arbitrators respectively, although Mr Sartor last week had abandoned a similar plan for intermediate developments between \$1 million and \$20 million.

Freehills property partner Barry Barker said lawyers were unlikely to be completely excluded under the planning reforms, because the complexity of the legislation would require expert advice even if lawyers could not attend hearings.

"Many are already ringing up and saying they are more confused than ever regarding their various alternatives," he said.

The NSW Law Society said it was inconsistent with the principles of access to justice to exclude lawyers from the planning process.

Law Society president Hugh Macken said the exclusion of lawyers from aspects of the process "is viewed as a shallow and misguided approach to reducing delays in the system".

The Australian Financial Review will produce a national survey to coincide with the law firm announcements in the Legal Affairs Section on Friday June 27 & Friday July 4. Take this opportunity to promote your law firm or new partner announcement in this informative law focus.

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PUBLICATION DATE: 27th June & 4th July 2008

FINANCIAL REVIEW

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