

What you get is what you see

James Eyles

When Robert Ishak and Bill Petrovic stepped out the vision for their law firm, William Roberts (then not named), 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 us 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, including the notes, letters and accounts, all made available at any time of the day or night.

Ishak says the firm's insurance clients gain a close watch on the progress of key matters and have avoided random audits on bills. So far, there have been no surprises. "Over the past three years, the document from the client to the client 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 content but we give them links to health/Australian Legal Information Institute and built-in information systems and portals."

"If I see a section in my advice and they want to read the whole of the sections, they go straight to the client file and make things easier for the client."



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

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 now you get the technology, the processes and the system rights, you can focus on what we do best: advising on the law and appearing in court."

William Roberts opened for business in Sydney in July 2007 and is built on insurance work. Ishak says the firm's law overheads allowed it to compete in the market. It now offers a broad range of commercial advice and has recently begun transacting their own work.

The use of technology has not

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

"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 11 professional staff and is looking for five more. Ishak says that when he talks to young lawyers about their experiences being supervised 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," says Petrovic. "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 recycling of files electronically. Ishak says "going green" saves the practice money.

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

"It is not entirely for altruistic

Family law courses help new arrivals

Ann Bevell

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 realities 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 rising delegation of judges and administrators from Indonesia. The method of education varies, from instructing bilingual community representatives to broader courses involving the police and community-based organisations.

After releasing a report on the program this week, the Family Court's Chief Justice, Diana Bryant, said with the brief history here – Australia, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq.

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

"This was one of a plethora of laws, and they were obviously quite a confusion, particularly with family law, between state and federal jurisdictions," she said. "Many of them are arduous matters which have been the subject of discrimination by police, registries and courts, and they are also quite nervous about authority figures."

"The program quickly broke down once they had spent time with the court's staff and local police. One ambitious individual went so far as to mock a judge's wig while sitting before the bench."

Chief Justice Bryant said previous attempts to build an understanding of the law through brochures distributed at a time of legal visits were "not 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 program," 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 other people had held quite significant positions in their country," she said. "There was an academic, one was a cabinet minister and the last was a former people who had been refugee camps and then came to Australia for a completely different life."

NSW planning to exclude lawyers

Max Bevell

Lawyers that the NSW government look back out of parts of the development process, despite opposition to change to three new bills unveiled in parliament last week.

Lawyers are covered by NSW Planning Minister Frank Sartor's remarking through what would be the biggest planning reform since the current legislation began in 1976.

The reforms champion the use of a government-appointed Planning Advisory Commission (PAC) and Joint Regional Planning Panels (JRPP) to hear applications over 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.

Adem Arthur Robinson planning partner Paul Lalicich said that when

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

Similar provisions concerning 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 those could be asked to give evidence or produce documents. Mr Lalicich said:

"Customary representation in the profession is 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 those circumstances," he said.

"Lawyers representing 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 pointed the reforms as necessary to reduce the burden of

Planning disputes almost always involve resolution of questions of law.

Paul Lalicich, Adem Arthur Robinson

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

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

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

Financially savvy partner Terry Butler 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 they were 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 Mackay 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 provide your law firm or law partner announcement in this information rich issue.

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