

It's Time to Address the Move to Mobile's Impact on IT Infrastructure

With the urgency of the shift to remote work hopefully somewhat over, it might be time to more holistically address implications of this move to mobile—and recognize that not all of these changes are negative.

By **Brad Paubel, Lexicon** | November 30, 2020 at 07:00 AM

Remote working—and the pains many firms had in making that transition—has been headline news for most of 2020. While it's particularly in focus right now, this shift toward a more mobile legal workforce has been happening for some time. With the urgency of the shift to remote work hopefully somewhat over, it might be time for law firms and their IT professionals to more holistically address the implications of this move to mobile. It's also important to recognize that not all of these changes are negative.

Shifting to a Mobile-First Strategy

Perhaps the biggest impact of mobile has been its effect on how and where attorneys and staff now get their work done. Not being tethered to office desktops means people are accessing a firm's systems—and its data—from far more locations than ever. This raises a whole host of issues, particularly with respect to providing access as well as maintaining security.

People also expect different experiences from their mobile devices as opposed to traditional desktop computers. Historically, we've all been conditioned to be patient with our desktop computers if they take a bit longer to load a website or shift to another application. Our patience isn't limitless, but there is a bit of leeway that we unconsciously allow for traditional computers.

On the other hand, we expect much faster performance and access to information from mobile devices, particularly smartphones. Apps load much faster and we are used to quickly flipping between email, texting and web browsers. There's also the perception that smartphones make a wealth of information available at our fingertips with just a few taps. As a result, attorneys and staff might be far less content to put up with firm IT systems that bog down their mobile experience.

In light of all this, firms should embrace a mobile- approach when looking at their IT infrastructure. Because more and more work is now being done on laptops, tablets and smartphones, it makes sense to provide user experiences tailored to those devices. Mobile-first will also have a side benefit of improving the desktop computer experience, too, as it focuses on creating seamless access to the systems.

Becoming Device-Neutral

Even though mobile-first should be any firm's approach to technology going forward, it's really more about having systems that are device-neutral. The video game industry provides a good example here. Historically, video games where players interact with each other online were platform-specific. Players who were on Xbox, for example, couldn't play the same game against those using a PlayStation or a PC. Recently, however, the industry has shifted to a cross-platform environment where gamers on consoles and computers can interact.

To make cross-platform successful, video game companies have had to ensure the experience is the same regardless of what machine a player is using. This isn't just about aesthetics, either. It's essential that a player on PC not have an advantage or disadvantage when going up against someone on a console. There has to be a level playing field.

This device-neutral approach comes into play for law firms when choosing software applications and other systems that users will access via desktop, smartphone, tablet or laptop. Attorneys and staff must have the same experience no matter what device they are using. That means ensuring features match up and there are no gaps between what's possible with the smartphone app version of software and what is provided on desktop or laptop.

Being device-neutral is also important for client service. You want attorneys and staff to provide a seamless experience for clients no matter what device they are working on. They should not struggle to do something on a smartphone that they would easily accomplish on their desktop computer, particularly when speaking with a client or getting a deliverable out the door before a deadline.

Security is Even More Important in a Mobile Environment

The shift to mobile has also meant an exponential increase in security vulnerabilities. Rather than just securing computers within the walls of a firm, IT staff now have to make sure that data is safe no matter how an attorney or staff member accesses it. Something this important also can't rely on individual employees to ensure they are taking all precautions such as securing their home Wi-Fi routers or not using unsecure public hotspots.

In the age of mobile devices, security has to start and end with the firm's core systems. The place to begin is with a thorough outside audit of data security, and that should be done immediately. The results of that will determine next steps, which can include making use of VPNs to control how data is transmitted between mobile devices and the firm's network, cloud platform, etc.

Law firms may also have a bit of an advantage here. Though it's something of an inside joke that the legal industry has been slow to adopt new technology, when it comes to data security that could be a good thing. Most law firms will not be on the bleeding edge of this and having to figure out data security as they go along. There is more than enough information available now—gained in no small part through the experiences of companies that had breaches—to guide firms in making smart choices.

Address Problems But Focus on the Positives, Too

It's important to have the right attitude when looking at the impact of the shift to mobile. Yes, there are hurdles to overcome and challenges to address. There are, however, many benefits from this shift.

Increased productivity is one of the positive outcomes of having a remote workforce. People can spend less time commuting and get more done. There's also a lot to be said for the work-life balance that naturally happens when people have flexibility in how they do their work.

Mobile has also opened up new ways of engaging with clients. Where videoconferencing was once reserved for big deal events, Zoom meetings are now commonplace and happen for mundane reasons. Having more frequent face-to-face contacts with clients as a routine part of the workday will no doubt add and strengthen relationships.

This shift has marketing and business development implications too. A firm that is mobile-forward might attract the next generation of clients who favor connecting over Zoom or by text rather than driving to an office or through a phone call. Firms will be less bound by geography as well—and that could be a competitive edge for those with locations outside of the country's major commercial centers. If work can be done anywhere, clients can also come from anywhere.

Firms Must Have a Solid Plan for Going Mobile

The move to mobile is happening whether firms are ready or not. The market demands it—and so do the people who work at today's law firms. It's now expected for firms to have these capabilities, and that will only be more and more the case. There are also solutions for any of the challenges firms will confront during this transition, particularly from other industries where it's happened sooner.

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