

INDUSTRY INTERVIEW

Pioneers are also people

Matthew Stringer, chief experience officer for Stridon, says both technology changes and business transformation strategies always have to start with an understanding of your people's points of view

The path to an agile-working future was long discussed before many businesses finally enabled it for the vast majority of their people in 2020. So it isn't without some irony that this progressive transition came at a time when those people's working lives were suddenly – necessarily – more uniform and stationary. Collaboration tools quickly then became a lifeline for keeping people connected and updated in difficult times – but it's now commonplace to hear complaints that the camera hardly ever seems to be off. And the goal of significantly improved work-life balance at home has, by all accounts, not been an easy one to hit.

It's perhaps a good illustration of the fact that, while tech is always intended to improve people's experiences, it can sometimes prove a double-edged sword. So-called 'hybrid working' patterns may prove a better deal for people when shapes start to appear on the other side of lockdowns. But businesses would do well to remember that technology enables solutions to their challenges, rather than being the solution itself.

Matthew Stringer, chief experience officer at Stridon, is passionate about ensuring the technology law firms deploy is a force for good – whether that's improving individual productivity

at work, or helping them to meet their long-term goals for greater diversity and inclusion. "We're now saturated with technology options all the time, and how we choose to leverage it can have negative as well as positive impacts," he agrees. "That makes it critical that we take a people-led approach. You need to understand what people in the organisation really think and where the apathy exists. We always put people at the centre, and believe we should ultimately leave them with an improvement in their lives overall."

And putting people first means doing so from the very outset of any project. Stringer's business has the potential to offer everything from helpdesk to fully managed services, disaster recovery, cloud migration and cybersecurity best practice, he says. "However, we won't simply empty our big bag of tricks onto the table for people," he explains. "Not every piece will be the right fit for every firm." Rather, his team begins with a probing assessment of any firm's current operational maturity and culture in terms of technology, and then typically roadmaps a more agile and innovative future alternative.

"The work becomes less about buying another tool that promises to revolutionise the business and more a means of continuously using technology

"We're now saturated with technology options all the time, and how we choose to leverage it can have negative as well as positive impacts."

Matthew Stringer, chief experience officer, Stridon



more creatively to evolve the business model – whether management, legal service delivery or pricing.”

Cultural evolution

The firms Stringer sees don't tend to be those with innovation hubs and billable hours offset to investigate 'doing things differently'. Many are boutique in nature, or looking to operate very lean. They still carry the potential to be future digital pioneers or new-model law firms, however, and many are bought into that journey. But they require external expertise in transformation to support them, often starting with making the strategic vision clear. “The desire is there,” says Stringer. “The understanding of the need is there, with plenty of real-world examples to draw on.” But the capability or culture aren't quite there to translate the challenges experienced into the best programme of changes.

At the same time, some commonly entrenched behaviours at legal businesses can frustrate a people-focused and holistic approach. “Law firms do still have a tendency to begin by asking what their peers are doing in order to benchmark themselves,” he says. “Of course, that doesn't drive innovative ideas – it's just more likely to make everybody average.

“On the internal side, meanwhile, they shouldn't focus on any one initiative to the exclusion of everything else happening around it. You have to take the blinkers off to see other factors that may be material to success.”

And whatever those circumstances, adoption will need very careful thought – a cornerstone of a technology-positive culture at the best of times, but never more important than when processes are being fundamentally re-engineered as much as finetuned. Stringer points to the complex reallocation of roles and responsibilities as fee earners begin to take on more admin for themselves, for example, or are required to digitally upskill. “Without a solid structure for early engagement, you see a situation where technology appears to be foisted on people,” he explains. The change journey is already an emotional one, and this exacerbates it. Indeed, firms may need to introduce an entirely new skillset or role to analyse and compare how diverse sets of stakeholders work – and why – to make the approach to adoption a more personal one.

A continuous collaborative journey

In 2021, firms should also be carefully investigating the longer-term value in any short-term fixes – to rapidly enable homeworking, for example. “Some things may have worked well at the time, but no longer do – quite possibly coming back to people and culture,” says Stringer.

They might need to drive more automation or efficiency into a process for it to thrive under a new hybrid working agreement. Others may have digitised content and processes, or reallocated responsibilities, in a rush – or find much longer-term inefficiencies are suddenly amplified. “A firm with well-entrenched clients that haven't been too demanding is likely to have retained more legacy-oriented technology,” he explains. These are firms that should now be more likely to change, but they won't necessarily be aligned for that in terms of their culture.

And however well prepared they are for transformation, there is then the changing cybersecurity threat landscape to consider.

Briefing's annual research, *Frontiers Legal IT Landscapes 2021*, found two-thirds of business leaders at firms had seen a growing number of client requests to carry out security audits at the end of 2020. More places of work inevitably means more movement of data between them and new risks to manage.

“Once again, people should always come before solutions,” stresses Stringer. Without that you're simply inviting poor adoption of process and technology. Work can be made both faster and more secure, he says, but only if the approach is more holistic than plugging gaps with new technology.

“You need effective security-awareness programmes to help people fully appreciate the risks and introduce that into the culture – not a tick-box exercise taking a few minutes, but learning and development plans that involve the other functions, HR and compliance, from onboarding onwards.”

Stringer's own strategy is to accompany firms as closely as possible throughout all such change journeys and leverage each technology option more effectively for longer-term digital transformation.

“We really don't have clients where we work on one project, and we're gone. It's always an integrated partnership for longer,” he says. The people in that relationship, of course, come first. ▀

For more information, visit:
www.stridon.co.uk