

Know how



Know-how Ushering in the next generation

Martha McQuay of **PLC** talks to **Catherine Flutsch**, head of knowledge management at **Bird & Bird**, about the firm's new know-how system.

15 June 2007 heralded the official launch of Bird & Bird's upgraded know-how system. The system allows all the firm's lawyers, across its 14 offices, to carry out one search to search the firm's internal repositories and external subscription sources. The upgrade retains some elements of the firm's original Solutions Lab system, including its name and some design aspects, but also implements substantial changes, such as the incorporation of new search technology, conceptSearching and an experience locator.

The building blocks

Solutions Lab was established in 2001, and, as Flutsch explains: "Everyone internally knew Solutions Lab and it was widely used. However, we started getting feedback from our lawyers that the search was no longer meeting their needs. Given the developments in search technology over the past few years, we thought that this would be the right time to start planning a significant upgrade to address our lawyers' requirements."

Bespoke solution

The knowledge management (KM) team, along with the IT team, embarked on the project by running focus groups to find out what lawyers within the organisation needed from the KM system. Offices across the network contributed to this process, and, according to Flutsch, were useful in providing differing views of what would be helpful.

The project team undertook research to find out whether an off-the-shelf KM system would fulfil the requirements identified, but did not find an appropriate product, so Bird & Bird designed a bespoke system in-house and commissioned an external IT consultant to build it.

The focus groups' feedback had been very strong on improvements that could be made to the existing system, particularly the need for a new search. As a result, the project team looked separately at a number of different search products that could sit within their own system, and chose conceptSearching as the closest fit.

They then built the basic proof of concept and asked lawyers from Bird & Bird's offices to test it; this was carried out over a

few months. After "good feedback" from those testing it, the search functionality was further developed and the team designed a bespoke user interface, in response to the focus groups' feedback.

Fast but phased

As Flutsch points out, because the system was built to search repositories that were already in place (such as the firm's existing document management system), the team were able to achieve the overhaul fairly quickly: "We pointed the search at all the repositories, both internal and external, added some bespoke functionality and then presented the information in the way that our lawyers told us they wanted to see it." As a result, the project took less than a year from start to finish.

The team took the decision to implement the changes gradually, to ensure a smooth transition (this was easier to achieve because the name and many of the design principles of Solutions Lab have remained constant). The plug-in of the new conceptSearching search was then used as the basis for the official launch of the new system.

Cutting-edge technology

According to Flutsch, Bird & Bird is, to her knowledge, the first law firm in Europe to incorporate conceptSearching into a bespoke know-how system. It searches for concepts and is based on Shannon's Information Theory and a probabilistic interpretation of latent semantic indexing and Bayesian inference, rather than working on Boolean logic. As a result, it delivers very accurate search results. Flutsch adds that the search's client list includes many non-legal institutions outside Europe: "It's interesting to see who else is using the search at the moment: it's actually bodies like the US Department of Homeland Security and the US Air Force."

However, Bird & Bird's focus is on the fact that the new system enables all of its lawyers, across its network, to undertake a single web-based search for information across:

- The firm's relevant internal repositories (including information on which lawyers have the most relevant experience in different areas); and

- The external know-how sources to which the firm subscribes.

The search then provides tabulated results across all the different resources ranked by relevance, with related topics listed on the left-hand side of the screen, and related “know-who” rankings (based on the number of hours spent on relevant work) on the right-hand side. Flutsch highlights the fact that the firm is able to adjust the search’s relevancy rankings, in order to maximise its efficiency.

One-to-one training

Since the official launch of the upgraded system, Flutsch and her colleagues have been carrying out one-to-one training for every lawyer in the London office, including partners, backed up by a one-page guide to the system, laid out as a screen shot. The KM team is also aiming to provide every lawyer across the firm’s network with direct training either on a one-to-one basis or through attendance at a presentation.

Flutsch says that, while the training presents a substantial undertaking, it “gives us a chance to liaise with the lawyers, so that everyone knows who to call if they have a query. We’ve also picked up some excellent suggestions from lawyers who were not part of the testing teams or focus groups. And it has meant that everyone has had a go once: even those who would not have normally done so.” She adds that “this approach might not be appropriate for every firm, but it works well in our collegiate culture”.

Flutsch reports that, as a result of such a high level of contact, the number of documents being submitted for the system has risen markedly, and, most importantly, there has already been a very successful level of uptake of the new system. Now the KM team is looking ahead to further improvements: “We’re pleased by the initial response to the system, but we don’t want to become complacent. We’re already planning the next significant upgrade, which includes many of the suggestions made by our lawyers during our one-to-one training sessions and our roadshows”, says Flutsch.