

ELECTRONIC DISCOVERY

A Melbourne law firm is proving that technology can make business better and life easier.

The thought of using technology may still be a novel one for some law firms, but one Melbourne criminal practice has fashioned a path for those stuck in the digital Dark Ages to follow.

Since establishing Doogue & O'Brien in 1996, principals Bill Doogue and Conor O'Brien have embraced, adapted, improvised and fashioned new technologies early and often.

"It saves an immense amount of time and has been fun," Mr Doogue said.

"I see how a lot of other criminal firms operate and our efficiency is huge. We are not under siege from paperwork and this allows us to do the easy things well. If you do the easy things well, you are not distracted from the big issue, which is doing the best for your clients."

When the firm opened its doors, Mr Doogue, who has a computing background, came armed with a self-designed database system, CrimeBase, that has since left Doogue & O'Brien a virtual paperless office and placed it at the vanguard of criminal law firms.

CrimeBase (www.crimebase.com.au) merges all the information needed to run a criminal law practice on a daily basis. It can change the way a firm collects, organises and retrieves client information, gathers and organises facts, cases and legislation and communicates with clients and adversaries.

In 2002, CrimeBase won the CCH Legal Technology Award and is currently used by a number of criminal law firms in Victoria.

Most of the technology used by Doogue & O'Brien is bought off the shelf or downloaded free of charge. Among the firm's current forays are video conferencing with incarcerated clients, an iPhone application and the ability for staff to access their computers remotely through iPads – tablet computers designed primarily as a platform for audiovisual media.

The firm also uses Skype (a software application that allows users to make voice calls over the internet) for weekly staff meetings and meetings with interstate practitioners.

It has entered the world of social media by blogging (<http://melbournecriminallawyersblog.com/>) and operating Twitter (<http://twitter.com/#!/LawyerMelbourne>) and Facebook (<http://on.fb.me/iUlpCY>) accounts.

The firm has also adapted technologies to great effect, most recently with a client whose

verbal outbursts had regularly interrupted his Supreme Court trial.

In an attempt to solve the problem, Doogue & O'Brien won approval from trial judge Justice Lex Lasry to set up an instant local area network messaging system to allow silent communication during the trial between the Bar table and the accused in the dock.

Justice Lasry told the *LIV* that while the messaging service did not entirely resolve the issue of the accused's often violent outbursts, it was particularly useful in reducing delays.

"This was certainly not the first time that such issues have arisen in a trial, but this was the first time that I had seen technology used in this way," he said.

"This was an innovative use of technology in the courtroom to minimise delay and increase the productive participation of the accused. I would like to see it used far more regularly."

Mr O'Brien attributes Mr Doogue with driving the technological push, saying his colleague "has introduced anything that came along that could possibly help the firm".

"It is really quite a cheap way to run your business, but it takes time and effort and you have got to get people to use it properly and you really need someone to really push it," he said.

Mr O'Brien said the cost benefits would be significant over the life of the business. This surplus is being used to employ legally-qualified staff who can value-add to the solicitors' work.

The firm has also found being technologically savvy has helped when it comes to recruiting and retaining workers.

"We see that being on the forefront of technology is a drawcard to getting the brightest and the best and technology gives them a lot of independence, great toys and flexibility," Mr O'Brien said.

Doogue & O'Brien solicitor Kristina Kothrakis has worked at the firm for three years and seen how CrimeBase has helped change her own workplace.

"At my last firm I would dictate letters and the secretary would type them out. There was no central database, we used lots of paper, we would have a diary meeting and be there with our diaries open to make sure everything was in place," she said.

"[CrimeBase] does this for us and makes our job easier and means we don't have to

focus on the administrative side of things. I didn't even really realise how much time I wasted on those tasks. It is exciting as a young solicitor to be part of such a progressive and growing business."

LIV CEO Michael Brett Young believes technology will prove to be the "saviour of the profession".

The LIV has been trialling the use of iPads with LIV Council members. With the iPad, Council members no longer need papers delivered to them, reducing the use of paper, binding and cost of delivery, while speeding up delivery.

"The modern lawyer is going to need to embrace technology and you are never too old to learn," Mr Brett Young said.

While technology is ubiquitous in the broader business world, its use so far in the legal profession has been more specific. Lawyers can more readily and easily research the law and communicate with each other and clients.

Mr Doogue said practitioners wanting to move with technology should try to start with a fast internet connection, become familiar with all aspects of their computers and investigate what different technologies could offer them.

And what does he have in mind for the firm going forward?

"There are things I would like to do, like biometric access to the database," he said. ●

JASON GREGORY

HOW CRIMEBASE WORKS

CrimeBase automatically synchronises with other computer programs, such as court calendars and Microsoft Outlook, tracking and retaining relevant information of a firm's clients. Forms and documents are automatically generated, as is correspondence such as SMS or email reminders of court dates to clients, ensuring communication is timely and ongoing.

Police briefs and other important documents are scanned and stored. Users are able to search for past results by a particular presiding judge or offence. The database also links directly to AustLII and tracks all court dates for the firm's matters. CrimeBase assigns cases, manages staff workloads and reviews all current files carried by a particular solicitor.

GOOD TIMES: Doogive & O'Brien principals Conor O'Brien and Bill Doogive have had fun in adapting technology to help improve their practice.

