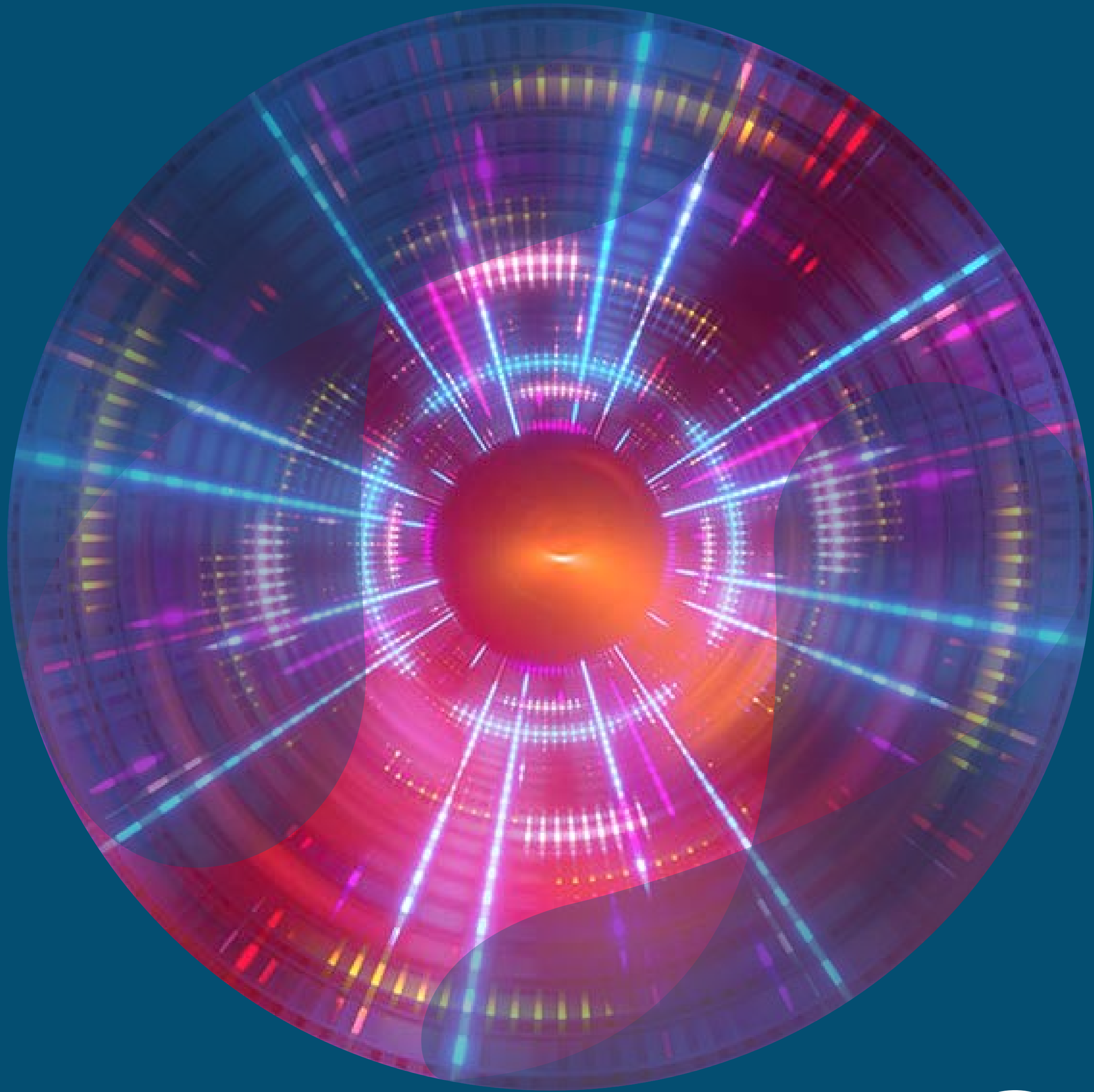

The 'Legal Front Door' and the digital transformation of law services

MEGAN JACKSON,
HEAD OF LEGAL PROJECT MANAGEMENT, TLT LLP

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The ‘Legal Front Door’ and the digital transformation of law services

Digital solutions are upending established processes and strengthening commercial relationships across nearly all sectors and industries in the global economy. Many consumers may love the fact that stepping foot inside a bank now seems like a distant memory, but for businesses the real value of the digital revolution has been data. With the right tools and processes, companies are using data to provide better services, operate more efficiently and breathe new life into ingrained ways of working.

The legal industry is no different, and the ‘Legal Front Door’ (LFD) is helping to redefine the traditional relationship between firms and their business clients. By setting up dedicated client portals, legal firms are making it easier for clients to submit instructions and see their progress. But LFDs also provide firms with more visibility about the way their clients are interacting with them, allowing them to optimise processes, proactively solve problems and become strategic partners as well as service providers.

The concept of LFD is not new and is something we at TLT have been implementing for clients for many years. However it seems the concept is growing in popularity as businesses look to gain more value from in-house teams as well as external service providers. It offers a range of potential benefits to both clients and firms, helping to streamline communications, improving response times and addressing some of the common points that impact these relationships.

In this guide, we will introduce the concept of the LFD, explain the benefits and explore some of the common challenges legal teams face in helping their clients to set one up.

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What is a Legal Front Door?

The idea of a 'Legal Front Door' is to establish a single point of entry for clients to interact with a legal team. This could be an external legal team within a law firm or an in-house legal team within a business. The concept applies in the same way.

Just as all potential clients need to enter a business through the front door, all client queries, requests and instructions come to the legal team through the LFD online portal. There is no set format for a LFD, but like a lot of digital solutions its strength lies in its flexibility. Portals can be adapted to suit particular workstreams or work for entire companies. They can be limited in scale to specific types of work, or they can encompass all corporate, tax and employment activity.

By allowing users to log legal requests through the portal, LFDs offer an important step change in the way clients communicate with legal teams. The portal may be as simple as logging a ticket and receiving an email confirmation and another when the task has been completed. It could also use emerging technologies like machine learning and natural language processing to offer intelligent bots that can answer simple queries, automatic contract generation or e-billing solutions.

Even without these kinds of market-leading applications, firms can still use the data generated by an LFD to reduce workloads and drive value. Frequent requests can be turned into FAQs and self-service analytics can allow clients to generate their own reports and documentation.

By replacing the fragmented and siloed approach to communication represented by emails, LFDs can provide law firms (and in-house legal teams alike) with visibility over every interaction their teams have with their clients. Because all requests come in through a single point of entry, they no longer rely on individuals picking up emails or answering calls to be allocated and assigned. This way, firms can continue to respond quickly even if key team members are absent due to holiday or illness.

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How does an LFD work?

An LFD can be as simple or as complex as a client needs it to be, as long as it creates benefits in terms of time, cost and ensuring tasks are completed effectively. It can leverage existing platforms within the organisation or can be developed as new from scratch. There are a number of out-of-the-box solutions currently available on the market, although these may not provide the flexibility and customisation that some clients will need.

Essentially, an LFD is a single point of contact between a legal team and its client that replaces email. Clients login, register a ticket or request a service which is then assigned to a member of the legal team. Once the ticket is complete, the client is notified and the job is closed. All of this takes place within the portal, and any additional calls, correspondence or meetings can be logged there as well.

The rapid pace of technological development is creating lots of opportunities for law firms and legal teams, but it also presents a risk. Firms need to ensure that they have a sufficient level of technical expertise or they risk being left behind. This is why the flexibility offered by the LFD is important. While there are important minimum requirements in terms of performance and data security that need to be met, these systems do not have to be hugely complex in order to be effective.

An LFD in action

We helped a client implement a self-service function for its large number of low value, low risk procurement contracts. Despite handling thousands of such contracts every year, there was no need for the legal team to see them. By allowing business users to generate these contracts themselves through an automated solution, the client saved time, money and manpower while also being able to track all contracts from a central portal.

Why are we seeing them become more popular?

Put simply, an LFD has the potential to address a lot of the issues that can add bottlenecks and inefficiencies to workstreams and projects. For companies with an in-house legal function, LFDs tie into the large-scale global shift towards legal operations. Chief executives and board members increasingly expect in-house legal teams to operate and be managed like any other business unit. This principally means controlling costs and providing visibility, but for legal teams it also often means working in a more structured way.

When companies begin to think like this and scrutinise their legal functions, some persistent issues can begin to appear. Slow response times is a common issue, but often business teams are sending out lots of small queries or instructions that take time to address but add little value to business operations. This is where self-service functionality, FAQs and automation processes can help reduce the number of lower-level queries being made by enabling business users to complete these tasks or find relevant information themselves. These time and resource savings can become significant very quickly.

Risk mitigation is also a key consideration for businesses, including what is outsourced and to who. Many companies are looking to make their procurement structures and legal panels smaller and more effective to optimise spend. Again, teams that can show they can operate like other business units are being favoured, including external firms.

For both legal firms and in-house teams, analytics hold the promise of being able to do what they already do but in a smarter way. There are lots of emerging concepts that relate to what digitalisation is allowing legal teams to do – lawyer of the future and knowledge management being two. The LFD represents the practical application of that thinking. It allows for the channelling of workstreams and makes it easier to identify what is valuable for a legal team to do and what is not. Capturing requests and directing them to the most appropriate team member through a portal is likely to be much more efficient than manual processes. Reducing email traffic can lead to faster response times, or perhaps automating certain processes could help free up additional team resource.

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LFD has the potential to give legal firms a much higher degree of visibility over how they interact with their clients. By helping businesses to set up LFDs, firms can benefit from tracking queries and instructions, measuring response times and seeing the needs of their clients in real time. This presents firms with access to a much broader range of detailed information that can be used to drive service improvements, spot emerging trends and better control costs. These insights will be critical if legal teams are going to move from reactive cost centre to proactive value creator.

What are the benefits to businesses?

As well as solving some persistent issues that have been a feature of the relationship between businesses and legal teams, LFDs can provide several clear benefits to clients.

Digital solutions are impacting nearly every aspect of modern businesses. The principal effect of this has been to create an expectation that users should be able to access the data they need or contact the relevant people quickly and simply. For many lawyers, email or phone will likely remain the principal form of contact, but many businesses want to be able to move faster. Just as instant messaging apps are increasingly used by teams as a way of quickly asking questions or requesting information, LFDs allow a user to log a request and begin a legal process from their desk at any time.

Being able to provide users with self-service functionality means that they can generate reports, access data or initiate some limited automated processes themselves, without the need to interact with a member of the legal team at all. Removing these entrenched roadblocks and bottlenecks not only empowers users to resolve queries themselves but frees up the legal team for more important and strategic work. Business users can also access real-time data and status information on their instructions and requests, helping to provide transparency. This contrasts with the previous system based primarily on emails, where clients can feel like they are having to send multiple messages to enquire about the progress of particular workstreams. By being able to see the information at any time, clients can plan and use their time more effectively. This is likely to resonate strongly with businesses looking to optimise their operations.

Any solution that increases data response time, reduces email traffic and leads to better efficiency is going to appeal to clients. But there are other potential long-term benefits. By ensuring that the instruction process is simplified and that real-time visibility of issues is increased, businesses can begin to expect legal teams to become more proactive. There are a number of ways in which this could work. If a legal team begins to receive an increased number of instructions relating to a specific area, they can suggest that the client runs training or they can create a specialised FAQ. For case management systems that are more complex, with potentially hundreds of matters ongoing, business intelligence and visualisation software can be used to make it easy for clients to pull out the insights they need. This visibility means that potential issues can be dealt with faster and improvements in efficiency and response times can be demonstrated clearly.

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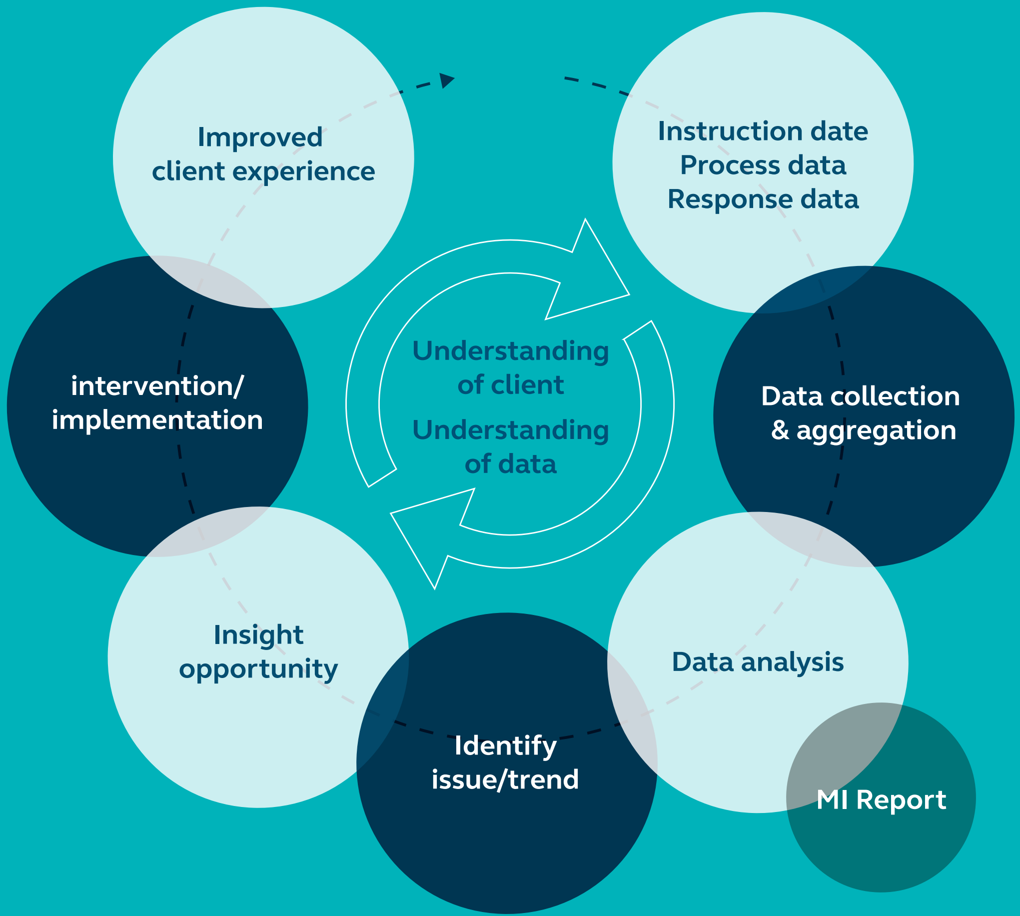
Putting an LFD in place

Despite the potential benefits that an LFD can bring for a firm and its clients, the process still presents some risks. Ill-thought out and badly built solutions are likely to frustrate users and lead to them reverting to more established processes. What was billed as a way to cut costs and improve response times can quickly begin to have the opposite effect.

There are a number of key considerations that legal teams and businesses need to think about for implementation to be a success.



Pre-planning

The obvious place to start is making sure that an appropriate amount of time is taken to choose the right technology platform and that there is a formal procurement process in place. While out-of-the-box could be quicker and easier to set up, it may not be truly tailored to the specific needs of the client. This is why the planning stage is so crucial.

There are two main aspects of making sure that an LFD will be effective. Firstly, there needs to be a clear delineation of who is going to be responsible for managing the portal, dealing with any issues that arise and updating the content. This is important because while your LFD may arrive with a bang and a fanfare, it will only take a short period of neglect for it to fall out of favour.

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Secondly, the solution needs to be created to provide maximum value right away. A client may want a system that leverages automation but if, in reality, only a limited type of instruction is going to be coming through, this may add unnecessary complication. It is always worth remembering that an LFD can begin with a single workstream and be expanded outwards over time, whereas a broad and inefficient system will be much harder to correct. Starting small may be the best way to understand the process and how best to optimise it, as well as what kind of functionality users will favour.

Change management

This is an often-overlooked part of the implementation process but is central to its success. There is no escaping the fact the LFD represents a significant step-change in the way that a lot of lawyers are used to working. And while they may not be actively resistant, this change does need to be effectively managed. If a solution does not make a client's life easier, they will simply revert to sending emails. The majority of lawyers spend significant portions of their day reading emails and an LFD will require them to log on to a different platform. This is why planning around functionality and user experience is so crucial.

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Communicating benefits is the foundation of successful change management. Internal communications and education sessions will be required before the system is implemented. Both clients and legal teams will be willing to accept a period of adjustment and disruption if the end result is a faster, more efficient and simpler system. For in-house teams the motivation is likely to be the ability to demonstrate value from a legal operations perspective, while external teams should be looking to gain more insight into how their clients think and work. Ensuring buy-in from senior management and board members if possible will also help to create momentum.

Making it stick

Keeping that momentum could also be an ongoing challenge. People will naturally begin to circumvent any roadblocks they encounter, which in turn could lead them to start bypassing the portal altogether. If the system is slow, clients may opt to call the legal team directly instead. Ensuring the solution is performing well from a technical perspective is one part, as is continually driving improvements in user experience. But communicating value is often equally as important. If users can see the success that others are having with the LFD, or the value it is generating, they are much more likely to stick with it despite their misgivings. As with any big change, there is often a period of initial scepticism that passes as long as the solution itself continues to work well

LDFs in action

For an international business, the environmental team required a system that could connect them to business operational teams located all over the world as well as their external legal team. This three-way system created a single place for the shared activity between these groups to take place and was used to publish announcements, direct instructions, identify trends and create focused training resources. By focusing solely on one workstream, the solution was relatively simple to use and quick to implement.

Driving positive change in the legal industry

The LFD is gaining traction because it represents a big step forward for the legal industry. It is helping legal teams move beyond outdated and inefficient spreadsheets to something more suited to the digital age. We think that it will be one of the major trends over the coming decade and that legal teams can benefit from being advocates of change rather than reluctant adopters.

LFDs have the potential to improve the service experience that businesses get from their legal teams. They can help get matters resolved faster, control costs and create value. But they can also give legal teams an unprecedented view into the way their clients operate. How they use this visibility will be an important factor in helping those in the legal industry operate like a modern business function and become valued strategic partners to their clients.

TLT FutureLaw. Changing the future of law. Ready for what comes next

We are the law firm for what comes next. We anticipate change to keep you a step ahead. Going beyond expectation. Challenging convention. We deliver solutions built on insight, process, technology and client need to ensure better outcomes for our clients. We have years of experience working with clients on their legal transformation journey and the implementation of LFD's.

Should you have any questions or wish to discuss any of the issues raised in this article please contact **Megan Jackson**, Head of Legal Project Management or **Clara Howard**, Senior Business Development Manager.

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