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Ralph Hopkins, CIO

BlackBerry Case Study

Cliffe Dekker
Legal Services
The verdict is in: Leading South African law firm improves client service with BlackBerry

Attorneys raise responsiveness and efficiency

The Challenge

In 2001 the directors of Cliffe Dekker set a target for the firm – to be recognised as South Africa’s premier commercial law practice. Since then Cliffe Dekker has moved steadily towards its goal, developing a stellar reputation for the quality of its counsel, responsiveness and client service. Today, it is one of South Africa’s top-5 law firms, with 53 partners and some 102 legal professionals based at regional offices in Johannesburg and Cape Town.

This strong growth was, however, putting a strain on the firm. How could its attorneys take on more and increasingly challenging cases without undermining client service or productivity?

The answer lay in how well its attorneys use their time out of the office. They spend the great majority of their working hours either in court, with clients or travelling. At the same time, they belong to teams, working closely with support staff and fellow professionals.

Time spent both in court and travelling is fraught with delays and changes, resulting in upset schedules, postponed meetings and emails that remain temporarily unread and unanswered. “We wish we could make better use of this time”, said the attorneys. “Our clients pay us for results, not excuses.”

The Solution

Some Cliffe Dekker partners travel regularly to the UK and the US, where they observed colleagues using – and extolling the virtues of – their BlackBerry devices. They could immediately see how BlackBerry® could fill in those communication and productivity gaps that required a solution. “Some of our attorneys had already tried to solve these problems using handhelds with dial-up connections,” says Ralph Hopkins, Chief Information Officer at Cliffe Dekker. “But they were too fiddly.”

As one user asked him, “Have you ever tried using a handheld and a stylus with a briefcase in the other hand?”

So when Vodacom launched the first commercial BlackBerry service in South Africa in March 2005, Cliffe Dekker was one of its first clients.

“We didn’t feel the need to do any testing, since we had already seen how well it was working for some of our international clients and colleagues,” explains Hopkins, “so we went straight to implementation.”

BlackBerry 7290™ devices were distributed to all partners, some attorneys and senior administrative managers. A total of 35 devices in the Johannesburg office and 20 BlackBerry devices in the Cape Town office have been deployed since April 2005.

“Implementation couldn’t have been easier” said Hopkins. “Only a week passed between ordering and the installation of BlackBerry Enterprise Server™. Once activated, the devices came on line immediately. The integration with our Exchange Server 2003 was seamless.”

The robust security and built-in data encryption of BlackBerry Enterprise Server makes it perfect for securing communications concerning confidential legal matters. “We have a strict lost or stolen policy. If it does happen, the user calls our IT helpdesk and we delete the device from the system as well as remotely erasing all of its data. This means no sensitive material is left behind on the BlackBerry device.”

Cliffe Dekker attorneys have quite an aversion to complicated solutions. “They just want a straightforward business tool that provides the information they need then and there.” explains Hopkins. BlackBerry won them over immediately with its powerful simplicity.

“I learned how to use the BlackBerry device with absolute ease and I was up and running in a matter of minutes,” says Tim Fletcher, Director, General Commercial Litigation. “Personally, I like reading my e-mails on a large screen and I prefer the QWERTY keyboard. I also prefer the scrolling button to a stylus or touchscreen.”

The first 30 users went though a formal training session, with subsequent users receiving one-on-one tutoring from a member of Cliffe Dekker’s IT staff. “It takes half an hour to run through the key features – the rest they pick up easily on their own,” says Hopkins. “Not surprisingly, we receive hardly any calls for technical assistance on BlackBerry devices.”

CASE STUDY CLIFFE DEKKER
Ensuring outstanding client service

BlackBerry quickly made a positive impact on Cliffe Dekker, where it is used principally for email, calendar and contacts. It has become an invaluable productivity tool for attorneys.

As Fletcher says, “Our attorneys have very heavy schedules, and the wireless calendar lets the attorneys and their assistants keep diaries updated in real-time without any scheduling conflicts.”

With clients all over South Africa as well as overseas, email is the primary form of communication used at Cliffe Dekker. Since BlackBerry offers “push” technology, it allows attorneys to send and receive email whilst they are on the road, without the need to turn on their laptop and log in. As Hopkins remarks, “it has really helped us keep in touch with our clients. They get responses fast, which reflects well on the firm’s image.”

Finally, BlackBerry has had a positive side-effect on the lives of the attorneys—less stress and better work-life balance. “The attorneys really appreciate being able to take care of business quickly and on the move. They no longer have to plough through a backlog of email after a busy day in court. And if they’ve been away from the office for a few days, they no longer spend their time thinking about what’s waiting for them when they get back.”

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About BlackBerry
BlackBerry is an end-to-end solution developed by Research In Motion® Limited. Founded in 1984, Research In Motion is a world leader in the wireless communications market.

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