

How Integrated Communications Drives Disruption at a U.K. Legal Powerhouse

Slater & Gordon CIO Jon Grainger strives to make “work anywhere” and “automate everything” a reality.

In October, shortly after he joined the law firm Slater & Gordon as its CIO, Jon Grainger had something of an epiphany.

The firm is one of the U.K.’s largest and is known for being customer-centric and technology-driven. If it was going to live up to that image, it needed to embrace the concept of “work anywhere” as part of its strategy. It’s what forward-thinking employers were doing to attract a new generation of workers, and it would give the firm access to a larger pool of talent.

By the end of the year, many of the pieces were in place, including widely distributed Microsoft Surface devices configured with the required internal communications tools, security functions like VPN and desktops that could be managed remotely. Grainger had also selected, but not yet deployed,

Key Takeaways

- With its “automate everything” ethos, Slater + Gordon onboards clients more like a commerce site than a law firm
- Self-serve intake not only helps clients but frees lawyers to focus on critical tasks
- By focusing on outcomes rather than billable hours, the firm is disrupting the legal services industry

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8x8's cloud communications platforms, to modernize the way its lawyers and agents interacted with customers.

So when Covid hit in March, the firm was better prepared than most. "We had our offices ready," says Grainger. "What we needed to do was plug in the telephony part of it."

Within just eight days, the firm—including its contact center, which was distributed among a handful of regional hubs—began operating from what Grainger calls "2,000 micro offices."

"Even now, six months into this craziness, there are companies that I call on the weekend and I can tell they're running on email," he says. "If we didn't have the 'work anywhere' strategy, we wouldn't have been able to capitalize on it."

Disrupting the legal industry

Slater & Gordon was able to act with the speed of a tech company because in many ways it is one. The firm doesn't fit the traditional image of the stodgy law partnership whose bread and butter is high-priced services for corporate clients. Instead, it's focused on the needs of ordinary consumers, with services that include personal injury, medical malpractice, employment claims, family law, wills, and more. With one-click contact options, 24-hour support, customer testimonials and offers of discounts, its web portal in some ways feels more like an e-commerce storefront than a law firm website.

Grainger thinks and speaks in the language of tech. Besides his "work anywhere" push, he advocates concepts like "automate everything." He sees an imperative in eliminating legacy technologies that get in the way of scaling operations.

The firm's new communications platform, he says, is key to delivering on those fronts. It not only supports an efficient distributed workplace but also allows the firm to transform the way legal services are delivered. In just a few months, the platform has done much to facilitate communications with customers across text, voice and

video. Soon, it will be able to turn many tedious, time-consuming customer interactions into streamlined self-serve experiences.

“We’ll be selling outcomes more than time,” Grangier says. “That’s what’s super disruptive to other law firms, because they will be selling time.”

Portal based communications

Every day, Slater & Gordon handles a steady stream of incoming customer inquiries. They come as the result of online searches, referrals from partners, word of mouth and other channels. Regardless of their origin, the inquiries are funneled into the firm’s contact center operation for intake, where they can be handled across communications modalities. “What excites me as CIO is the fact that they’re multi-channel,” Grainger says.

The benefits of being able to toggle seamlessly between video, voice and text as needed are significant, as different moments in a customer journey require different levels of engagement from lawyers and agents. And importantly, when it comes to customer interactions, cloud communications have largely replaced email.

“The amount of spam and phishing attacks have turned email into the No. 1 threat vector for businesses,” Grainger says. He thinks other customer-focused businesses will soon embrace similar portal-based communications systems. “Email is going to be defunct in about three years for external communications,” Grainger predicts.

Slater & Gordon’s new communications platform has delivered other improvements, as well. It automatically distributes incoming inquiries to the teams that are best



CIO Jon Grainger’s “work from anywhere” mission modernized the firm’s customer interactions

2012

S + G was founded in 1935 in Australia, and entered the UK market in 2012

£30 million

investment planned in 2018 for technology and digitizing legal services

able to handle it, whether they are in London, Liverpool, Manchester or another location. “Without something like this, you would have to try and guess what your capacity is going to be,” Grainger says. “We are able to share workloads across different teams, and that’s giving us a great degree of flexibility.”

Self-serve legal services

But the real payback from its cloud communications capabilities, Grainger says, will come in the next few months. Before the end of the year, his team will deploy the capability for customers to do much of their own initial in-take. This “self-serve” approach will greatly reduce the load on lawyers and other personnel, freeing them to focus on the areas where their expertise is needed.

Take the typical journey of a Slater & Gordon client who has been injured in an accident and is seeking legal redress. During the in-take, the client would be expected to provide all the details of the accident, along with documentation to prove their identity, and go through an endless list of questions. “It can be pages and pages of questions over the phone just to get data in the system,” Grainger says. “If you listen to those conversations, it’s a back and forth, and requests for clarification and spelling of names. That’s the element where we want to automate as much as possible.”

Grainger notes that not all interactions will lend themselves to self-service. In some cases, a customer will always want to start with a lawyer. And even in cases where customers are onboarding through self-service, they will reach a point where the system will determine they are ready for the input of a lawyer and switch them automatically.

Using machine learning, the service will work as something of a “sorting hat,” Grainger says in reference to a wizard’s cap that assigns Hogwarts students to different houses in the Harry Potter series. “It’s a model that basically learns that some types of cases need to go to one team for immediate triage, or go directly to a

Using machine learning, cases in self-service will be triaged and routed automatically to free up lawyers to focus on where they can add value

lawyer,” he says. Other cases might benefit from staying in self-serve mode a while longer, he adds.

Customers who for whatever reason felt they had enough with the self-service process could also ask to switch to a human. “If they decided to stay with self-service it’s because we’ve designed it well, and it’s actually working for them,” Grainger adds. “Introducing self service at this level is not something I’ve seen done in legal services in the U.K. before. It’s going to free up our lawyers to focus on where they can add value.”

Work anywhere

As work anywhere becomes a more permanent requirement for millions of people in the U.K. and elsewhere, Grainger hopes his IT team of about 80 can help their colleagues be as productive as they can at their jobs. And that may involve upping everyone’s tech chops.

“One of my ambitions is to make everyone in the company the best technologist that they can be,” he says. That doesn’t mean lawyers or customer service reps need to become engineers. But in a world where technology is as vital to the functioning of a business as oxygen is to the life of an organism, “people should probably know a bit more about it,” Grainger says.

From the perspective of a CIO, the Covid crisis has had some upsides. Everyone at the firm, whether they are in IT or not, understands the role technology plays. “The argument in favor of embracing the cloud has gotten crisper,” Grainger says.

And while some legacy systems have yet to migrate to the cloud, Grainger is confident they won’t get in the way of the “work anywhere” mission. Indeed, by September, the firm plans to downsize its London hub significantly—from a traditional office into a collaborative space where colleagues and customers can meet when necessary—and to review its presence in other locations across the U.K.

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