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Solicitors 'ready to innovate but wary of change' – SRA survey

7 July 2015 | By John Hyde

Topics: Law firm & practice management, Regulation and compliance

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The majority of 'legal service providers' feel they have leadership and culture in their firm to support innovation – but just a quarter have taken the plunge in the past three years.

Joint research from the Solicitors Regulation Authority and Legal Services Board was published today showing that 25% of providers have introduced a new or improved service since 2012.

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The survey of 1,500 organisations, including around 900 law firms, found 80% feel they have the management structure to make innovation possible, with 40% having put in place practical steps to promote new ideas.

Solicitors' firms were found to be more innovative than barristers' chambers, particularly through extra use of electronic communication with clients and the use of electronic forms and case management systems.

Other key areas where providers have changed have been in working on fixed fees, new practice areas and greater use of technology.

Almost three-quarters of providers on social media use the platforms to advertise services and provide legal updates or free information, although the direct provision of legal services through social media was uncommon.

Speaking at a press briefing ahead of the report's publication yesterday, LSB chief executive Richard Moriarty said the report reflected a mixed view of firms' willingness to innovate.

'Very encouragingly innovation is happening out there but there is room for improvement,' he said. 'I certainly believe there should be more innovation in the sector to reflect the change in consumer expectation.'

'There is unmet legal need and if we are going to tap into that there has to be new ways of structuring and delivering legal services.'

The report reflected some interesting attitudes to innovation and how it can be achieved.

Solicitor firms appear to be convinced the driver for innovation can be found in-house, with 60% respondents rating the recruitment of non-legal staff as not important.

Almost one-quarter (23.6%) of firms regarded regulation as a barrier to innovation, with 17.4% citing a lack of necessary finance. Fewer than one in 10 solicitor firms reported that attitudes among staff or clients were holding back innovation.

The report concluded that alternative business structures have had a 'positive' effect on innovation and are 13-15% more likely to introduce new legal services.

SRA chief executive Paul Philip said alternative business structures had proved more 'nimble' in their leadership and ability to make decisions than traditional partnerships.

The regulator has granted around 500 licences of which 19 have been linked to firms on the stock market, and Philip admitted the SRA can improve its handling of those entities.

'We spend a lot of due diligence asking who owns law firms,' he said. 'We have sorted that out.'

'The real issue is can we regulate law firms? We have lots of people who understand the issue.'

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There are other issues we need to develop our skill set in, such as listed [firms]. We are learning as the market learns.'

Readers' comments (13)

David Crawford | 7 July 2015 12:34 pm

Another useless survey! What on earth does the above tell us that we were eager to know? Precisely nothing!

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Anonymous | 7 July 2015 01:13 pm

Some firms have started using e-mails it seems.....but the large fountain pen and wax stamp is still preferred.....

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Mick C | 7 July 2015 01:34 pm

Yes indeed, ABSs certainly are more nimble in their leadership....!

And the SRA should try to start handling "these entities", rather than improving its handling. Regrettably, the SRA is nowhere near up to the task.

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Anonymous | 7 July 2015 03:46 pm

The elephant in the room will always be "the penalty for failure" that the profession carries like such a badge of honour but has the effect of stifling innovation and development.

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Andrew Twambley | 7 July 2015 03:57 pm

I would love to know how much this useless survey cost

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Anonymous | 7 July 2015 05:25 pm

I am glad that the SRA questions if it is up to regulating the new entities it has let loose on the world, and a bit worrying that they acknowledge a shortfall in necessary 'understanding' having done so. From my perspective it looks like they are riding on the back of a tiger!

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Peter Ryder | 7 July 2015 09:01 pm

Solicitors are lawyers - the law regulates society. Most people in society like certainty. Change is the antithesis of certainty. Ipso facto lawyers tend to be conservative, at least in their professional capacities. When will the people writing these articles plus the people at the front of innovation in our profession (and the SRA of course) get this simple conundrum, Change in the way we deliver our services, particularly in the way we understand the law, is not what our clients want. Indeed it is not what society needs. This desire for the new can best be seen in the CPR, which have suffered 80 'updates' in the 17 years since they were introduced, an average of just under five per year. What sort of lunacy is that?

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Anonymous | 8 July 2015 01:24 pm

Pah! Electricity: it'll never catch on. Electricity is the tool of the Devil I say.

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Lydia Langtree | 8 July 2015 02:03 pm

I still don't see why fax machines fell out of favour. They're fast and free at the point of use, and you get a lovely physical letter which somehow feels more official than an email.

Someone laughed the other day when I asked if they had a fax machine. I justified myself by explaining the benefits, and they asked if I was selling them. I told them "I don't need to, these babies sell themselves!"

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Andrew Benington | 9 July 2015 01:43 am

20 year old case management technology, a Facebook page and Website SEO. So what.

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