Prescription for progress

The new world of dispersed work has demonstrated the value of reliable and timely business intelligence like never before. But the reality is most law firms still have a long road to travel to make their analytics truly transformational, says Barry Talbot at Catalyst BI

O ne thing a year of global pandemic has brought us plenty of is data. Armchair data scientists everywhere are sure to have opinions on the latest Covid-19 trend graphs, and the UK prime minister insisted that 'data, not dates' would be driving the roadmap out of lockdown three.

And this data is, of course, a very serious business. Barry Talbot at Catalyst BI explains that many NHS trusts have been receiving updates from ambulance services and A&E departments, and concerning available hospital beds, around every 30 seconds. Hospitals can make important decisions about resources and prioritisation ahead of seeing a patient for the first time.

And there's an element of predictability to this management, he explains – patterns emerge and lessons can be learned. Using the R programming language for artificial intelligence, certain situations can be not only carefully monitored, but also improved.

Easier access and faster reporting

It's a current example of a broader trend in data analytics: moving on from the descriptive or diagnostic – the ability to say what has happened and why – to predictive and prescriptive modelling of scenarios. With the latter, organisations can make significantly different decisions based on calculations about what is likely to happen in future.

But for all of the reported investment in data science at some, Talbot says law firms as a group are really only at the very beginning of exploring how this capability relates to improving their own models and outcomes for clients. Catalyst BI has projects underway with a few to help them do so. There are, however, quite a few quicker analytics wins they could also consider, particularly in terms of its consumption.

For example, the Qlik Sense solution, which Catalyst BI provides, now has functionality that enables a fee earner – at home, or in the office – to interrogate a dashboard for a very specific piece of

information for themselves. "That is in itself a leap forward from the older way of dealing with your data," Talbot says.

Another example is making client reporting more efficient – something Catalyst BI has recently been working on with the law firm DAC Beachcroft.

Firms have long needed to offer many different things to their different clients when reporting – they can have thousands of bespoke reports to prepare every week or month. "Today they can set up and hand a client a Qlik Sense dashboard that's frequently refreshed with data, perhaps every 15 minutes," says Talbot. "It's practically live at that point. If a client has a large, expensive matter ongoing, they might access updated information they need to see several times a day."

The greater convenience on both sides of the relationship is clear – less work for the firm, less waiting for the client. Moreover, with Qlik Sense those displays will also be rendered at the right size for reading on multiple different devices – a capability well suited to the new normal of being away from the office.

Instant updates for all parties

Anecdotally, of course, many firms have reported increased employee productivity during this long remote working period. There is a combination of factors involved there. "But improved access to dashboards has made a huge difference to how people perceive what they can and can't do with information during lockdown," says Talbot. And whether with fewer distractions at home, or simply being under increased pressure, it appears that adoption of this technology has also improved.

Red, amber and green 'signalling' remains the norm. "We can deliver a chart that visualises progress, and at the click of a button people can then see the tabular data behind it. And we have the ability to alert that they need to stop one particular task to do something else – either internally, or for a client – before it's too late."

Furthermore, with Catalyst BI's proprietary off-the-shelf web portal Coeus, such project and performance analytics don't require the firms to write any code. They can drag and drop assortments, and also securely share the results with any external parties that need to be updated – clients, suppliers or other stakeholders.

Retailers have used this arrangement for continuous

visibility into their supply chains, and to manage stock replenishment as demand for their products suddenly changed in lockdowns, Talbot explains.

"If both management and fee earners at law firms had the tools for similar levels of quick visibility, with no need to jump through as many hoops, they could be far more effective in responding to change."

Data warehouse in order?

Talbot expects to see a law firm using Coeus for Qlik Sense analytics in 2021, but says their use of analytics remains largely descriptive and diagnostic overall – inevitably backward-looking. The area where some movement to the prescriptive end of the spectrum is already occurring is harnessing past claim data to predict and model the progression of new cases in litigation. "In an area such as medical negligence you find certain factors repeatedly arise. So if you have the data available you can apply an algorithm to reach a likely conclusion very quickly," he explains.

But having data in the correct state right across the firm – and understanding it well enough to apply that artificial intelligence, for example – is another matter. Since being acquired by private equity firm Thoma Bravo in 2016, Qlik has also acquired several businesses in the booming data management space that speed up the process of preparing data to be consumed.

One recent Catalyst BI project – again with DAC Beachcroft – has involved using a data automation application to navigate a much faster route to value when building a data warehouse. "People are now starting to apply some AI to the data management process itself," Talbot explains. "If you need to introduce data from a different source, there is probably a data connector for this that will automate the process. All the necessary data is brought together into an operational data source without having to write script every time something new needs to happen. It can be cherry-picked out again at the end, and save an incredible amount of time in the process."

That's time that could instead be spent investing in more advanced analytics opportunities, and ideally improving understanding of all of a firm's possible futures. ◢

> For more information, visit
> www.catalyst-it.co.uk/bi