

Proptech Expert Discusses Role Of Technology In Conveyancing Process

Q&A with Greg Bryce,
Chief Executive Officer,
poweredbypie

Legal technology is still in its infancy and law firms are only beginning to scratch the surface in their understanding of how innovative tech can help the conveyancing process.

The government has recently invested £2 million in legaltech innovators, recognising the importance of ensuring the legal sector, currently worth £35 billion a year to our economy, continues to be considered a global leader.

The English and Welsh legal system is still used more than any other for resolving global disputes and the government is keen to showcase the sector's legal expertise and innovative prowess.

Despite this, legal technology has faced sporadic and inconsistent implementation by law firms and has not been embraced with the same gusto and warmth as other sectors.

Whilst the benefits of artificial intelligence (AI) have long been discussed, only 4% of small to medium sized businesses currently use machine learning solutions.

Even the tech savvy younger generation are unaware of legal technology with 49% of the Law Society's Junior Lawyers Division (JLD) oblivious to the benefits of lawtech. Additionally, 70% believe that full implementation is still at least five years away.

However, legaltech, blockchain, AI and a myriad of technology-based solutions are available and being used to improve the customer journey, reduce conveyancing times, improve efficiency and free up legal service providers to complete more complex legal work.

Greg Bryce, poweredbypie's CEO, has taken the time to discuss the technological offerings available to the conveyancing sector, how the tech can improve the job of a conveyancer and how technology could revolutionise the sector in the future.

It seems as though the legaltech wave is only starting to crest and implementation of technology is still very much in its infancy; How was technology used by conveyancers ten years ago?

These days Law firms' case management systems can integrate directly with our Brighter Law suite, so from the initial customer conveyancing enquiry, the solicitor can log-in, search for the property, add phone and email details and click to email the client an instant quote. One click from the client accepts the terms and conditions and instructs the solicitor, then the case is passed to poweredbypie to collect the funds on account and order the searches. This really speeds up the processing time and frees up solicitors from getting bogged down with admin. It's a simple, efficient workflow.

However, ten years ago the landscape was very different from the crowded marketplace we have today. There were just three main search companies offering online solutions with the key challenge being the lack of broadband connection! Law firms certainly understood the benefits of being able to order searches electronically but sometimes the speed of the connection was too slow to be able to download any plans!

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How is technology being used in the sector at the moment?

Although technology is advancing rapidly and we are now increasingly able to make use of it in our everyday lives, the legal sector faces very specific challenges which has to some extent, limited potential take up so far. Most solicitors still need to print and post documentation or meet clients in person to complete significant elements of the conveyancing process. High value transactions have made law firms a target for cyber fraud and phishing attacks and so now email is now an unsafe method of communicating confidential data. To protect clients, law firms understandably need to trust in any new technology application which has been designed to solve these threats and speed up workflows.

However, I'm certain that lawyers went to law school to become experts in the law! As a result, quite rightly, handling complex legal cases is where their expertise lies. Therefore, to unlock advances in technology that do have the potential to speed up legal business processes, law firms need to have the opportunity to work in partnership with technology experts who can make a real difference by being focused on developing applications that solve specific challenges. Introducing technology for technology's sake could be detrimental to both business and trust and potentially erode client confidence.

At poweredbypie our goal is to improve workflows by solving specific challenges through the use of technology. We always say: "the very best technology works away in the background and you don't even know it's there." One simple example is the use of poweredbypie's Brighter Law suite, one element of which can bring more immediacy to property risk assessments. Currently, with our ordering system, solicitors can log-in and check an address with a post code or unique property reference and a search is returned indicating the associated risks. Although local authority and drainage and water reports take a little more time, an environmental report is returned within a matter of seconds. This is a significant improvement on using fax and fax back, or even prior to this, firms being involved in transactions without being able to advise clients about the risks at all.

A criticism of the current conveyancing process seems to be the length of the conveyance and a lack of communication during the process. What practical impact is technology having on the sector?

Relatively uncomplicated property transactions usually take around 13 weeks to complete because there are many links in the chain and so the process becomes protracted. Quite rightly, solicitors don't want to purchase reports until they know the sale is going ahead. Similarly, simply posting a client letter and waiting for it to be returned may take a working week and so inevitably the whole process is open to delays for a variety of well-founded reasons.

Technology can't solve all the 'bumps in the road' relating to the conveyancing process but it can help with certain elements. One practical area that technology will soon be able to improve and speed up the process does relate to communication. Multi-factor authentication software has the potential to make secure communication instantaneous.

At poweredbypie, we have developed software and technology products which enable secure communication between solicitors and clients in this way. Just like the banks, we are employing multi-factor authentication to enable solicitor and client to communicate in a secure environment.

Practically, this means a solicitor would invite a client to log-in to a secure portal. It is safe to invite the client via email providing sensitive information is not revealed in the body of the text. The client logs-in and creates their own password. Then, a text message authentication is necessary to access the area online. In this way, access is secured as the email invite plus a device/phone is required.

The secure portal can then be used for exchange of documents and information, protecting clients and the solicitor and speeding up the conveyancing process at the same time. Electronic signatures can also be used so long as they can be authenticated. One way to ensure the authentication process is to use an electronic signature company such as DocuSign, since courts have already ruled a signature using DocuSign is presumptively valid.

We anticipate successfully deploying secure communication systems that require multi-factor authentication in this way, will be a game changer for law firms.

Why is it important for conveyancers to embrace technology and how will it improve their business?

Customers will drive change. These days, you can buy expensive consumer items online and have them delivered the following day with just one click of a mouse. My son's generation maybe surprised to discover it will take around 13 weeks to buy their first home and during that time their conveyancer will mainly communicate by post!

In the future, consumers will choose to use the law firms that offer the app or a secure document portal to communicate because electronic communication is familiar, every-day and natural to them. Conveyancers need to embrace technology or die.

What role can artificial intelligence play in improving things like digital conveyancing or cyber security?

Artificial intelligence has a number of potential applications in digital conveyancing. Machines can be taught to recognise patterns and images and make decisions based on the comparative results. The more they learn, the more accurate they become. This will have a place in file validation and ID authentication for example.

Computers can be taught to recognise and auto-fill other legal

documents too, these might include forms for 'fixtures and fittings' or any documentation that need address matches. This offers the potential to reduce the chance of human error and cut down on administration enabling lawyers to focus on the important legal work.

Why is moving to digital conveyancing proving a risk for the sector? Can conveyancers mitigate this risk?

Criminals look for the weakest link in any chain. They will steal the car without the crook lock or break into the house on the street without a burglar alarm. We have a responsibility to make digital conveyancing as secure as possible, so thieves and fraudsters can't commit crime. However, the stakes are high, transaction values and the amount of money changing hands makes conveyancing a prime target. We've witnessed some firms resorting to print and post in order to avoid email where most of the cyber security attacks occur through phishing. However, as well as presenting its own security risks and because of the time it takes, print and post cannot be a long-term solution. I've talked already about multi-factor secure authentication and this must be the way forward for client communication to mitigate the risk for digital conveyancing.

How do you think technology will develop in the future and what role will it play in other legal services?

The challenges faced by other legal services are similar to those faced by the conveyancing sector. For example: solicitors all need to be able to communicate securely with clients to access records, supply documents and exchange banking details. Therefore, poweredbypie's technology has been designed to be sector agnostic. By this, I mean a secure portal accessed by multi-factor authentication is as applicable to conveyancers and their clients as it is to solicitors who work in wills and probate and other areas of the legal work too. It is a testament to the quality of the individuals we have working at poweredbypie - and the feedback our valued customers have given to us - that we have been able to design our products in this way for the benefit of the industry as a whole.

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