



### Overview

- ◆ **Firm:** Debenhams Ottaway
- ◆ **Area of Business:** General Practice: private client, family, tax, insurance, litigation, commercial and residential property
- ◆ **Location:** St. Albans, Hertfordshire

### Business Objectives

- ◆ Economic downturn leading to a need to manage the cost base efficiently and move a high fixed cost base to a flexible and variable one
- ◆ Ensure service provider able to offer full fee earner support in a secure and confidential environment.
- ◆ Maintaining/improving client service in a more competitive environment.

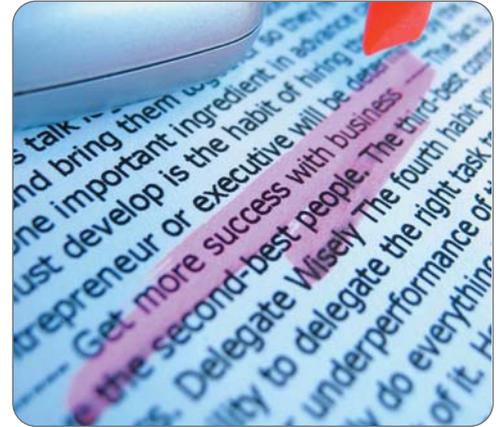
### Results

- ◆ Significant savings in fixed support costs and also associated overheads
- ◆ Support costs closely match levels of activity within the firm
- ◆ A consistent workflow throughout the firm with no log jams or political issues between firm departments
- ◆ An increasingly effective and cohesive use of the firms document management system.

DEBENHAMS•OTTAWAY  
SOLICITORS

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Godfrey Mather,  
Chief Executive



### Challenge

Debenhams Ottaway solicitors was formed in September 2008 following the merger of Turner & Debenhams solicitors and Ottaways solicitors. The two firms were individually significant, successful organisations with proud traditions but the merger resulted in a firm of nearly 50 Fee earners and 5 offices, both in London and in Hertfordshire.

The merger also led to a need to establish a new organisation and examine ways to reduce the overall cost base, especially as the tie-up took place just as the first winds of recession were starting to bite the UK economy – the Lehman Brothers collapse happened just as the merger became effective.

Chief Executive, Godfrey Mather explains: "Even before the merger was completed, we could see that the downturn was imminent and likely to be severe so we had to take a look at our cost base. Staff support costs were the highest single expense and also a fixed cost. We needed to both reduce this cost and make it flexible without compromising the efficiency of our service to clients in what was going to become an even more competitive marketplace."

### Solution

Godfrey was aware of comments in the legal press about outsourcing transcription and looked into solutions that would work effectively with the firm's BigHand digital dictation system and Videss case management system.

"The firm were in favour of outsourcing as a principle with IT support, HR and marketing already handled externally. We had also invested in new technology but were still using old fashioned working methods and almost a 1:1 fee earner:secretary business structure. It was clear to me that this was inefficient and needed to change."

Personal experience of foreign call centres and a suspicion that non-mother tongue transcription would lead to quality and service difficulties led the firm to focus on onshore suppliers.

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"We looked at a number of suppliers of the service. For us, client delivery is all important and so we needed our chosen supplier to be completely up to the task of providing an effective and efficient service. Voicepath were recommended by BigHand and impressed us with their knowledge, both of how they could meet our requirements in terms of document quality and turnaround and also how they could work with our technology."

Voicepath were asked to carry out an analysis of the firm's current transcription service which served to confirm issues that the firm suspected and highlighted internal inefficiencies. Mather confirms: "The analysis was interesting and illuminating and confirmed the potential benefits that were available. It also confirmed that we would need Voicepath to access our document management system directly, so they could have access to client information, precedents etc and offer the fee earners a full support service. Allowing this meant we had to fully consider data security and confidentiality issues. Voicepath answered our queries thoroughly and are ISO9001 certified. They were also able to demonstrate that their IT systems and work procedures were secure and well managed."

There was some scepticism initially amongst some of the partners at the firm and so the service was initially trialled with 5 fee earners in the Litigation and Family departments. It didn't take long for them to confirm that the service worked well which allowed the firm to move forward to a full roll out programme.

Michelle Ginger, IT Administration manager, took on the role of ensuring a smooth roll out: "We produced an outsourcing crib sheet for all of the fee earners and agreed a staggered roll out of the service both internally and with Voicepath. The whole process went very smoothly, with Voicepath able to use our existing Citrix infrastructure, and the support from the helpdesk team at Voicepath was, and continues to be, invaluable – having someone on the end of a line to answer queries about individual dictations helped get buy-in from the fee earners who were concerned about not having someone in the office."

## *Benefits*

Adoption of the service within the firm is now widespread with approaching 50% of all dictation outsourced to Voicepath.

Mather has been impressed and delighted with the whole project: "When we first started using Voicepath, we had 37 secretaries supporting our 45 fee earners. Just over a year later, we have 15. I have calculated that we have saved £500,000 in salary costs alone through using Voicepath. In addition, we have been able to consolidate our team into 2 offices with all the associated overhead savings whilst also freeing up space to bring in more fee earners as and when the market allows."

"Client work has been unaffected and indeed has improved in many ways – we have a guaranteed return of dictation which is profiled directly into our systems thereby ensuring a consistent workflow with no log-jams. Though we had tried to share work across the firm previously, political lines of demarcation prevented this taking place. With Voicepath, the politics just disappear."

Mather actually feels more can be achieved: "I would give Voicepath a 5\* award out of 5 and I don't see why we can't push a higher proportion of our dictation to Voicepath. Younger fee earners can and should be typing short items themselves whilst dictating the longer or more complex items and sending them externally. The internal processing is simple and we should be able to make further savings into the future."

