

Why investing in business support services is the key to resilience for modern law firms

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People are the most important asset in the legal industry and for a modern law firm, this doesn't just mean attracting and supporting the very best fee-earning talent. Highly skilled administration, human resources, IT, facilities, business development, management and marketing teams have just as great a role in keeping firms competitive.

There are paradigm shifts happening across the legal industry, from new ways of working to the evolution of legal tech, but creating a culture which invests in and values business support services can drive efficiency gains, increase productivity, improve employee retention, enhance client experience and, in turn, grow profitability.

Law firms that are slow to embrace this approach to developing and nurturing fee-earners and non-fee earners alike risk not only their short-term survival, as demonstrated by the pandemic, but also their long-term resilience and growth.

"One of Ogier's core values is putting people first. We work to create an inclusive, progressive culture, one that supports autonomy, growth and personal opportunity, whichever department you work in. It's one thing to say that but I'm able to think of real, commonplace examples of how we make that happen," said Guernsey Practice Partner Christopher Jones.

"One example is that all of our people are trained up in Lean Six Sigma, a process improvement method, and everyone is encouraged to creatively problem solve and take ownership. What I'm seeing now is a level of talent, innovation, flexibility and ambition in business support services that you would not have found at a law firm 15 years ago.

"Without this level of ability and technical expertise, there is no way we could have seamlessly transitioned to remote working on a global scale, like we did – and Ogier didn't just cope well during the last year, it enjoyed impressive growth across jurisdictions."

Lockdowns wreaked havoc on laws firms large and small, putting business continuity plans to the test. IT teams were required to move from an office-based to a home-based operating model without missing a beat. HR teams had to mobilise employees to work remotely almost overnight, all while giving strategic advice on COVID-driven employment changes and addressing impacts on wellbeing.

Talent and Development and Business Development professionals had to take events and training online, swapping face-to-face interaction for virtual environments, while still creating value for employees and clients. Marketing teams found new ways to communicate as firms strived to be agile and empathetic to their workforce and clients.

For facilities managers, there were the logistics of empty buildings and social distancing, while managers, analysts, researchers and administrators had to deliver business critical services from their homes.

"The fact that everybody had a work-from-home kit made seamless service delivery possible. The speed at which our workforce was able to get up and running was impressive, especially compared with the experiences of some other firms," said Christopher, who sits on Ogier in Guernsey's Business Continuity Committee.

Also on the committee is IT Services Manager Richard Gordon, whose team was responsible for ensuring a workforce of nearly 600 people (at the start of 2020) were able to simultaneously work remotely across time zones.

"The priority was to make sure that everybody could still perform their day-to-day tasks to meet our clients' needs, and we were confident we could do it. We had our business continuity plan, and through our flexible working policy, we had already equipped people to work from home," said Richard.

"Admittedly, we'd never had our entire workforce working remotely at the same time but what made it possible was the firm's investment in technology and training – so people actually knew how to use the technology to make their lives, and clients' lives, easier.

"Ogier invests in everyone and because of that, we have the best talent in our team. There's always been a 'one firm' philosophy at Ogier but I think the pandemic brought us, as a company, even closer together."

From facilitating emergency equipment replacements across six jurisdictions to battling people's poor home connectivity, the IT Services team were faced with plenty of logistical challenges. But in response, Ogier's IT and Service Innovation teams were also able to create and launch new products, including award-winning online wills portals for Guernsey and Jersey, which allowed clients to plan their wills without requiring face-to-face interaction.

For the 12-person Global Support Team (GST) based in Guernsey, flexibility, agility and the ability to easily interact with colleagues around the globe were the key to maintaining smooth service delivery.

"We had to figure how we were going to get key tasks done, without compromise. For example, introducing a rota system to allow certain office-based tasks to continue – for some legal departments that go to court, for example, there's an important paper element. We had to think on our feet," said GST Team Leader Samantha Lihou, who has worked at Ogier for six years.

"When your opinion is asked for and valued, it's very motivating, and we're encouraged to keep learning and developing our careers. I currently have two members of my team studying for their legal secretary diplomas, which is a great achievement, and there are plenty of training opportunities both internally and from external course providers. The support from Ogier is always there."

So, how does a law firm achieve global business continuity and ensure its resilience, while maintaining excellent client service? The answer might just lie in its ability to create an environment in which business support services have the resources and talent to thrive and innovate – and a culture in which they are considered holistically alongside their fee-earning colleagues.

About Ogier

Ogier is a professional services firm with the knowledge and expertise to handle the most demanding and complex transactions and provide expert, efficient and cost-effective services to all our clients. We regularly win awards for the quality of our client service, our work and our people.

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