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LPM

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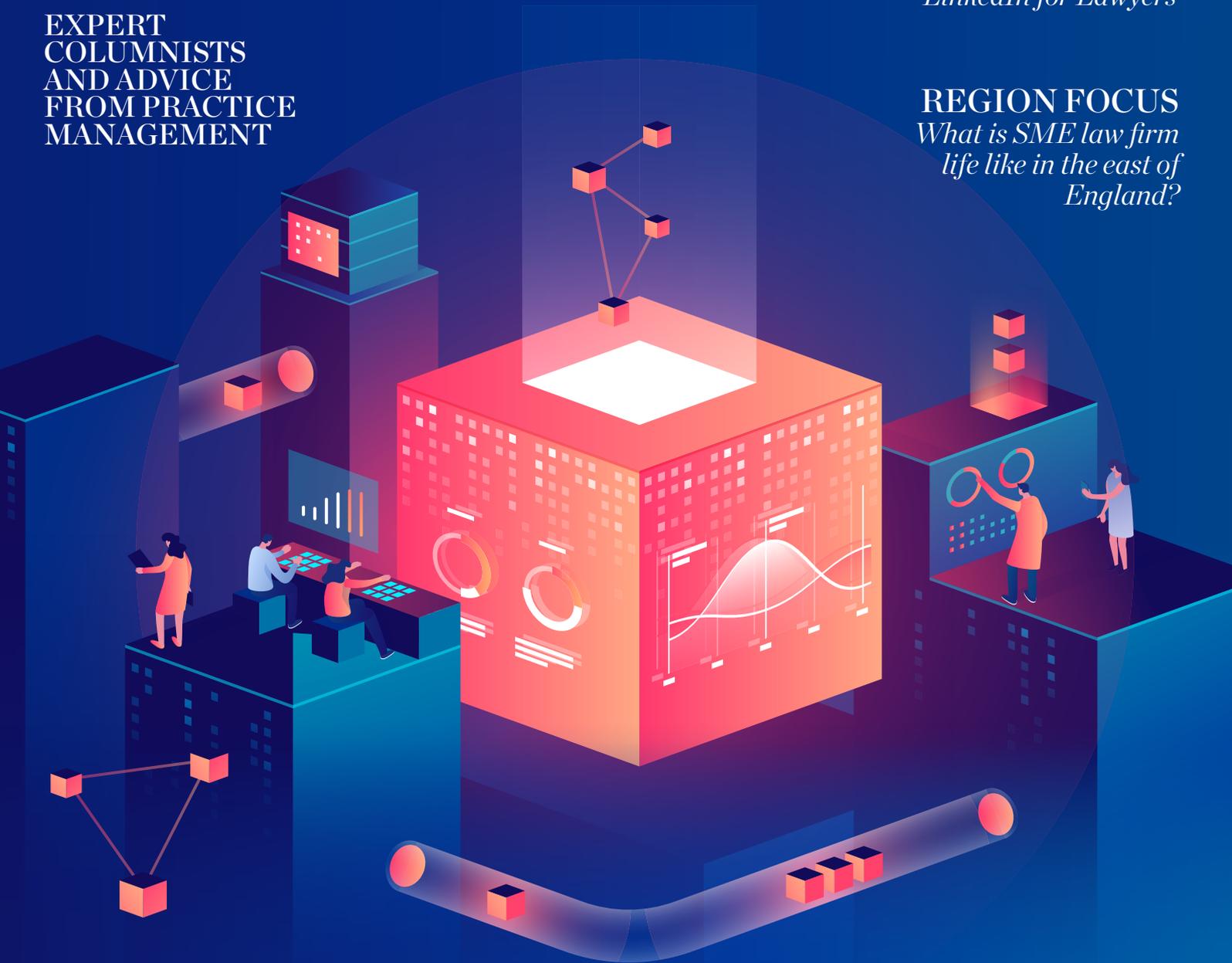
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CAPTURING LOST TIME

How are law firms at measuring productivity? Phil Snee, development director at Linetime, thinks they could do better. He offers advice for them on how tech can make it easier to record time and maximise captured data

There is no question that law firms are serious about capturing and measuring performance data. The hours worked on a particular matter – hours which form the basis of KPIs such as billing and utilisation rates – are the lifeblood of a successful law practice. The big question is, are firms doing it as well as they could?

Phil Snee doesn't think so. Out of a total of 10, he would give them a score of five, perhaps a six if he's feeling generous. "They prefer the traditional ways," he explains, talking about the requirement to input performance data. Admin tasks can take a back seat to the everyday practice of law. "They're reluctant to do what they see as a non-legal process, although the new generation tends to be more amenable to it," he says.

ALWAYS BE MONITORING

Based on his observations of the legal industry, Snee says that the traditional practice of recording time, and then charging for that time, actually doesn't happen as much anymore. "People are using fixed fees owing to the pressures of competition," he says.

Somewhat counterintuitively, this makes it even more important for lawyers to record time scrupulously, even if they won't be charging against it: "Recorded time tells you whether your fixed fees are accurate. It also helps you to monitor your efficiency and profitability, and enables you to base your matter budgeting on an analysis of what was done previously." This latter point is why Snee advocates for detailed, transaction-level data migrations: "A system's useless if you've lost your historic data."

But, given all this, people still neglect to time-record. "Traditionally, people panicked when they went back and realised that they hadn't recorded. It's dangerous to lose that time." Human error and oversight are perhaps inevitable – and this is where the right tech can come in. "It all depends

on whether they have systems in place to allow efficient and effective data collection and analysis," says Snee.

He sees tools such as Linetime's Liberate (the case and practice management solution) as part of the answer. It can capture data automatically, not only saving fee-earner time, but catching those small bits of time spent on a matter which would otherwise be lost. "Our team will do calculations for customers based on this to predict ROI during the presale stage," he says.

One method of helping to ensure that measurement then takes place is to work with people's desire for immediate feedback and reinforcement. According to Snee, this could mean setting up processes to monitor activity in real time. For example, Liberate has a real-time barometer-type display of time recorded against budget. "So, as you record time, the display will go orange if you exceed tolerance, and red if you go over budget", he explains.

He offers another simple, but effective, tip – make sure clocks are always visible, no matter the task the lawyer is engaged in. In Liberate, the clocks are ever-present: "Even if they are in Word, the fee earner will still see the clock hovering above the document."

ALWAYS BE SWITCHED ON

One way to make time recording more painless (and capture lost bits of time in the process) is to use wraparound methods – programme time recording as part of established tasks (or workflows, if relevant), he suggests. "So, as you start a process, whether it's an email, a phone call or word processing, the clocks are switched on. With Liberate, we switch ours on automatically. We recently embedded the clock into Outlook. When people run a particular process – as most case management systems do – they'll clock up a few units of time."

When it comes to more efficient data capture, he also believes that smartphones should play a



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role. "With the advent of Siri and other voice products, your phone should be able to digitally dictate your time-recording narratives."

MAXIMISE CAPTURED METRICS

Once data is captured, how can management make best use of it? Snee has a number of tips. One practice he is particularly keen on is making comparative performance charts available. Although he acknowledges their potentially divisive nature – "they show someone's failure" – he sees them as effective motivation tools if they're used correctly and displayed to the right audience: "Law firms can make these visible comparisons available across teams, department-wide or firm-wide."

He speaks from first-hand experience – this is exactly what they do at Linetime. "We use these charts to provide a constant, visible indication of the comparative activity of our sales and support staff," he says.

Dashboards also need to be built carefully. Snee thinks that the ability to create viewer-oriented dashboards is a huge development in terms of a

delivery mechanism for KPIs and reporting – as long as they focus on the most relevant information. "Unimportant information will dilute the impact. You don't want clutter." And in his experience, charts demonstrate well and can be useful, but "reports are still ultimately more popular".

He also recommends that dashboards and reports be easy to design and maintain. They need to be constantly reviewed, "otherwise they will stagnate and be frozen in time."

There is the risk that they will initially be useful, he says: "But because they never get changed, they won't progress and improve. You have a flurry of activity when something is installed, and then it falls into disrepair."

He offers one reason dashboards shouldn't be static. "Nowadays, we are able to drill into associated granular data levels to inspect and rectify problems or other actions."

And this last point perfectly illustrates the purpose of all the tools, the recording, the data and the metrics. "KPIs and reporting should assist and promote management activity," he says. **LPM**

ABOUT US

Linetime is a specialist provider of Microsoft-based practice and case management solutions. Clients include mid-tier law firms and in-house legal departments.

www.linetime.co.uk

