
Technology is an opportunity for law firms, but not without qualification, DAC Beachcroft survey reveals

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Almost 50% of respondents to a survey by international law firm DAC Beachcroft on key risks facing the legal profession identified that, whilst developments in technology are an opportunity, they can also increase risk.

The survey was carried out among lawyers, brokers and insurers attending the firm's recent solicitors' risks conference, entitled "The New Agenda for Law Firms". The keynote speech was delivered by Professor Richard Susskind OBE, the internationally-renowned expert on legal technology.

"Professor Susskind is known as a supporter of so-called "law tech" and has correctly predicted a number of developments in the profession, not least the increased reliance on artificial intelligence," said Clare Hughes-Williams, partner in DAC Beachcroft's Solicitors' Risks team.

"Professor Susskind does, however, identify a skills gap in firms and predicts that law firms will increasingly rely on individuals whose skills go beyond those learnt during formal legal training," she said. "That skills gap is already apparent, as 68% of those who responded to our poll during the conference confirmed. They do have confidence in the profession's ability to keep up-to-speed with technological advances, but not in all areas. Only 9% were confident across the board and 24% of those responding did not have any confidence at all."

Following Professor Susskind's keynote speech, DAC Beachcroft partners Clare Hughes-Williams, Phil Murrin and Tom Bedford, along with Max Billek, partner at US law firm and Legalign Global member, Wilson Elser, discussed how risk issues might impact the development of technology in law firms.

"Given the number of law firms and barristers' chambers that have already suffered cyber-attacks this year and that this growing threat shows no sign of abating, the importance of IT security cannot be overemphasised," commented Tom Bedford. "Law firms will have to step-up in relation to the security of their systems and the training that they provide to their colleagues, if they are to avoid these business critical incidents."

Asked whether firms should continue to invest in and implement new technology, all delegates agreed that this was crucial in order to achieve cost efficiency and deliver advice to clients in a "modern" way. Indeed, the new generation of tech-savvy clients requires this.

The confidence around artificial intelligence is not universal, however. Although 44% of delegates said that increased reliance on AI made them excited for the future, 26% said they felt both ambivalent and unsure.

"Further work and education will be necessary to ensure that the profession, as a whole, is confident about the benefits that these sorts of advances can bring," Hughes-Williams said.

During a panel debate on whether smaller/high street practices have the resources and capability to survive the predicted tech revolution, Professor Susskind noted that, although implementing technology can be seen as expensive and beyond the reach of many high street practices, smaller firms are often more agile and able to introduce new technology more quickly. Notwithstanding that, funding is still likely to be an issue and 54% of those responding to DACB's survey concluded that they did not think that high street practices would have the resources and capability to survive.