How Does Dentons Keep It All Together? In Part, This Company

By Roy Strom

I’ve written before about Dentons’ astonishing growth rate during the past decade. The global legal giant is nearly 10 times the size of predecessor firm Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal, which Dentons’ now-global CEO Elliott Portnoy led a mere eight years ago.

Portnoy and the firm’s management have created a well-oiled machine designed to close law firm combinations more quickly and frequently than any firm ever has. Its size is impressive. But it doesn’t mean all that much if the firm’s lawyers in, say, Tbilisi, Georgia, have no easy way to link up with those in Toronto. If clients are interested in one law firm serving their global legal needs, it is important that the law firm act like, well, a law firm.

With that challenge in mind, it was interesting that last week Dentons put out a joint press release hailing a license it signed with a privately owned software company called HighQ. The partnership, according to the announcement, will help Dentons deliver a more “collaborative” product to its lawyers and clients in cities around the world.

“Our clients’ digital experience is core to our value proposition, and we are delighted to be partnering with HighQ,” said a statement from Scott Saundry, Dentons’ global chief digital officer.

Sure. But what is HighQ and what does it do for Dentons?

I spoke with Stuart Barr, chief strategy and product officer at HighQ, who calls the company’s software-as-a-solution product an “intelligent work and client-engagement platform.”

It’s not too far off to think of HighQ as creating for law firms and their clients the sort of point of access that a banking app provides customers on an iPhone. That, of course, is not really a new idea. Law firms themselves have developed client portals. (Seyfarth Shaw’s comes to mind.)

Some other firms have scrapped homegrown file-sharing products in favor of HighQ. Haynes & Boone, for instance, put its “Client Connect” out to pasture three years ago to sign up with HighQ.

“There was emotion in it, but when you look at the dollars and cents of it, it just didn’t make sense,” said Thom Wisinski, chief knowledge officer at Haynes & Boone.

Much of the reason firms are shifting from homegrown products, Barr said, is the versatility that HighQ provides.

“The reality is technology really isn’t the differentiator,” Barr said. “It’s what you do with it. It’s how you use it that makes a difference.”

Take Allen & Overy, for instance. The innovative London-based legal giant used HighQ to provide a new service to banking clients after a European regulation required they re-paper up to 10,000 contracts.

Using a platform within HighQ called iSheets, Barr said Allen & Overy was able to build a rules engine that staff could work through. Updated contracts were a few answered questions away, and lawyer time per contract was cut from three hours to about three minutes, said Barr, adding that the review time for 10,000 contracts went from 15 “lawyer years” to about 12 weeks.

Fasken, a newly rebranded Canadian firm with about 700 lawyers, is banking on HighQ’s interface with clients to help it launch a product called “Fasken Smart Lease,” said Robert Garmaise, Fasken’s chief innovation officer.

The firm’s real estate clients will be able to work through a system that will let them select standard types of leases or letters of intent. The clients can then have their lawyers at Fasken quickly review the contracts and check for broader issues before shipping it back to the client.

“Batting it back and forth a few times in the app, you can quickly get to a final product,” said Garmaise, adding that he estimates a process that can take a week could be reduced “hopefully” to under a day.

So, HighQ does a bunch of different stuff for different firms. But what will it do for Dentons? That’s a bit less clear.

The firm declined an interview through a HighQ spokesperson, but Barr said Dentons’ use of HighQ is part of a broader “technology simplification and modernization process.”

Dentons is looking to create a “digital workspace,” Barr said, one that will let its lawyers work more easily with one another and their clients.

It seems like HighQ has got the call for important law firm tasks, one now magnified by the vast size and scope of a firm like Dentons.

Based in Chicago, Roy Strom has been reporting on the legal world since 2011. He covers law firms with a focus on how the Big Law business model is changing. He writes a weekly column for Law.com called “The Law Firm Disrupted,” covering changes in the legal services market. He can be reached at rstrom@alm.com. On Twitter: @RoyWStrom