

Business & Careers

Hanging up on the traditional phone system



Luigi Benetton
Hi-Tech

When Michael Berger and his partners started business law firm Aluvion Law, they deliberately made what might seem a strange omission: the firm has no phones.

“Desk-based phones are costly,” says Berger. “In this day and age, they aren’t necessarily required.”

Aluvion runs lean, and its partners structured it for growth. At time of writing, it comprised three partners, one associate, one articling student and one “virtual” lawyer. Growth plans hinge largely on adding more virtual lawyers who might rarely see the office.

“People don’t have to be in a physical office

space,” Berger says of his non-traditional law firm business plan. “Lawyers can work from wherever they are with full access to our systems.”

David Feld, who has an office and staff, made the same no-phone choice when he recently switched phone systems. Feld, a partner in residential real estate law firm Feld Kalia Professional Corporation, wears a Bluetooth headset that connects to his iPhone (on which he handles most of his calls) and his other computing devices. Staff make and receive calls using software on their computers while wearing headsets.

Feld admits some staff initially balked at this unconventional setup. His argument? “If you use two hands for typing, you get stuff done twice as fast. I only discovered that later in life.”

Both firms chose a voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) system. VoIP calls travel the same networks built for data traffic, not the plain old telephone system (POTS). VoIP phones, for people who buy them, look like traditional phones, and VoIP systems offer all features of traditional systems.

Their digital nature means that VoIP systems offer features not usually found on POTS-based systems, like: auto-receptionists; voice mail delivered as sound files via e-mail (so people need not log in to voice mail every day); reception and transmission of faxes; and the ability to add extensions and set the phone system’s behaviour.

Aluvion’s system provides what Berger calls a “centralized look and feel” comprising a main phone number and all the extensions they need.

Omar Ha-Redeye’s phone system includes virtual faxing. The principal at legal incubator Fleet Street Law receives, generates and sends faxes without touching paper. In his words, virtual faxing “lets us enter the 21st century as we continue to use 20th-century technology.”

VoIP systems work best on “business-class” Internet connections and hardware, since it occupies more bandwidth than text and static images. It also requires a higher quality of service (QOS), meaning it must be given high priority on data networks. While some latency (the time required for a data

packet to travel from source to destination) is tolerable for text and images, it won’t do for phone calls. That’s why some VoIP systems require QOS fine-tuning so that, for instance, text and image transmissions can be paused while a voice call is in progress to protect the quality of the call.

Ha-Redeye notes he chose high-bandwidth Internet service for his office to prevent latency during calls. Feld went further. He maintains two Internet connections, including one dedicated to phone service.

All three lawyers chose mobile-friendly phone systems. Berger and his partners took a platform-agnostic approach towards mobile phone usage. Aluvion lawyers can access the firm’s phone system using Android, BlackBerry and iOS.

Ha-Redeye has office phone calls routed to his mobile phone, so he only gives his office number to clients.

“This system lets you control when you’re available and when you’re not available,” he says of this client management tactic. He adds a caveat: some of his colleagues who

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Director, Litigation

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Business & Careers

Solving problems starts by defining them

SHIRLEY LEIBOVITCH

No one is surprised about the need for ongoing training and development to become better professionals, but the idea that there is a new, more creative approach to problem-solving may seem farfetched—or is it?

Creative problem-solving is widely viewed as almost an innate or instinctive trait. The truth, however, is that creative thinking or innovation is actually a set of skills, attitudes and behaviours that can be readily taught, and a process that provides us with a framework for viewing challenges and managing interactions with clients and colleagues.

Without training and conscious practice, creativity skills, attitudes and behaviours are typically underdeveloped in most people. This is particularly true in professions where training, education and practice emphasize the importance of logic and of following rules. Even the notion of “creative accounting” has become a punchline. But in an increasingly complex business world, there is much demand for professionals who can see innovative ways of tackling challenges and can recognize that there may not be only one right answer to a problem. Lawyers can use the creative problem-solving process (problem formation, solution formation and solution implementation) to solve complex problems and add value to their organization.

Problem formation

It is not enough to solve a problem without anticipating and preparing for new, present and future problems. Creative problem-solving training helps people find problems. That may sound odd, but consider that innovation requires new solutions—and new solutions require anticipating problems, changes, trends and opportunities.

The next step is to find the facts



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that will help solve the problem. Fact-finding involves actively gathering information and then evaluating and selecting the facts that will most likely help in developing a set of fruitful and advantageous problem definitions.

Albert Einstein once said that if he had one hour to solve a problem to save the world, he would spend 55 minutes defining the problem and only five minutes solving it. When faced with a problem, many people tend to skip over the essential step of defining it, in favour of focusing on attempting to solve it.

Learning how to properly define, or redefine a problem creates potential for unique breakthroughs. In interactions with customers and clients, it is easy to become boxed into uncreative problem-solving approaches, as clients tend to communicate what they think they need (a solution) rather than the real problem they are attempting to solve. Ask the right questions in order to come up with the best definitions of the problem.

Once a problem has been defined, the process moves toward finding ideas to solve it. Create a

large number of potential solutions to target the established problem definitions and evaluate a few of them. Without creative problem-solving training, many people are prematurely critical of new ideas and fearful of creative solutions. Rather than build upon promising but imperfect ideas, they too quickly reject possibilities for innovative action.

Attempting to equate new and old experiences, people search for what is similar rather than what is unique in a new problem, and use available solutions rather than consider new or innovative ones. Decisions are often directed toward a single goal, even though most problems involve multiple goals that must be addressed at once. Eventually, it becomes easier to assume that things cannot be done.

Solution formation

Before drawing a final solution, identify a wide variety of criteria that could be used to evaluate the potential of each possible solution and select the most promising.

There are two very different kinds of problems and solutions that people encounter in their

work and personal lives. The first can be described as programmed—a fairly structured or predictable problem with a learned procedure that guides its handling. Solutions to these problems are typically sought by consulting rules, procedures or past experience, and relying on analytical skills.

The second type of problem is less structured in nature. Non-programmed problems have usually never been encountered before and have no pre-set rules and procedures to guide their handling. The main challenge with these types of problems is to discover and define “what is wanted,” because no one knows. Non-programmed problems require skills in problem and opportunity sensing, fact gathering, problem defining, creating and evaluating diverse options and implementing new ideas that have never been tried before. They require the use of imagination, non-linear thinking and some risk-taking.

Solution implementation

Action planning involves thinking up specific action steps that will lead to a successful installation of the new solution. Engaging others in this process will enable lawyers to be truly innovative.

Resistance to the proposed changes can derail the best-laid plans. The hardest thing for people to do in these types of situations is to defer judgment during divergent phases and trust that following the process will accomplish the goal. In order to gain acceptance, find ways to give ownership of the solution to those that it affects. If people can understand how the solution benefits them, potential problems caused by the solution can be minimized.

The last step in the process is to take action. Executing the actual decision is an integral part of the decision-making and problem-solving process. No matter how

carefully thought out the specific steps in a plan of action, taking action recognizes the need to “get on with it” and learn.

Working in a linear world

Today’s problem-solvers need to be able to creatively discover good questions and challenges, work through ill-structured situations, scope out a project and see an opportunity in a crisis. Creativity and innovation are not frills or luxuries but essential skills for building value, creating strategy and succeeding into the future. Clients and employers increasingly recognize and demand such skills and they are as important to learn as standard business skills and basic legal principles.

Creative problem-solving skills can be beneficial both personally and professionally. Whether planning for retirement or finding efficiencies in the workplace, creative problem-solving skills are key to one’s strategic planning ability.

The skills, attitudes and behaviours of the creative problem-solving process are best learned through active, in-depth and hands-on practice and experience. When given the chance to practise on real work-related problems in a safe learning environment, the confidence and willingness to tackle complex problems grows.

Understanding the different steps of the creative problem-solving process—and understanding an individual’s preferences for various stages of that process—builds awareness of strengths and weaknesses, and improves the ability to work with others. Through planned exercises, innovative concepts that have the potential to create real value can be developed.

Shirley Leibovitch is a CPA, CGA, with Canucks Sports & Entertainment in Vancouver.

System: It’s easier to control when you’re available to clients

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practise in other areas of law, like criminal, give their mobile numbers to clients, telling them to call in case of emergency.

He also blocks his number when calling clients to protect his mobile number. Otherwise, “clients may bypass your office number and call or text your mobile directly” at all hours, he says.

Ha-Redeye considers video conferencing a desirable “next-generation” phone technology. He notes

that “seeing counsel’s face helps, even if it’s on a screen” since that visual can help callers understand one another’s tone and intent.

When Aluvion lawyers video-conference, they primarily use GoToMeeting. “You can share documents, see people you’re talking to without physically being in the same space,” Berger notes.

Support for phone systems is never optional. Reputable service providers tout their support offerings, whether they be small and

growing like the VoIP provider Aluvion chose, or the larger and more established companies Ha-Redeye and Feld use.

Ha-Redeye used support more when he first switched to the service to figure things out, “when we hit speed bumps” in learning, he says. Speed bumps in phone connectivity hurt lawyers, Feld notes. While he’s open about his passion for the latest technologies, he scratches his head when he calls other law offices and

encounters “voice mail that sounds like it’s from the ‘70s. You need a good, easy-to-use phone system,” he insists.

Feld admits his new system costs more, but “if you get one or two extra clients a year because you’re responsive to client needs, that will pay for a better phone system.”

VoIP phone systems offer features that traditional systems don’t, thanks in part to the fact that VoIP calls travel the same networks as a firm’s other data. Sharing that net-

work also means easier integration with other systems lawyers use. For instance, the time, duration and numbers used for phone calls can be automatically recorded by time and billing systems. Staff who make calls from Feld’s office usually auto-dial from contacts in Outlook 365 or Salesforce.

“The ideal scenario is to integrate your phone, task management, billing and other apps on your phone and computer,” says Berger. “That’s where we’re trying to get to.”