

# Innovative Lawyers

FINANCIAL TIMES | July 6 2007

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## Bang up to date

Across Europe, lawyers are  
paying court to fresh ideas

**EXCLUSIVE**

New FT Law 50 ranking of  
private practice firms

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## Information technology by Alan Cane

# Legal firms rely on tried and tested technological innovation

**T**he first virtual law office in cyberspace, a daring internet initiative in a tricky case of defamation, and a generator which slashes the time required to produce complex documents by more than 90 per cent are among the highlights of the information technology category.

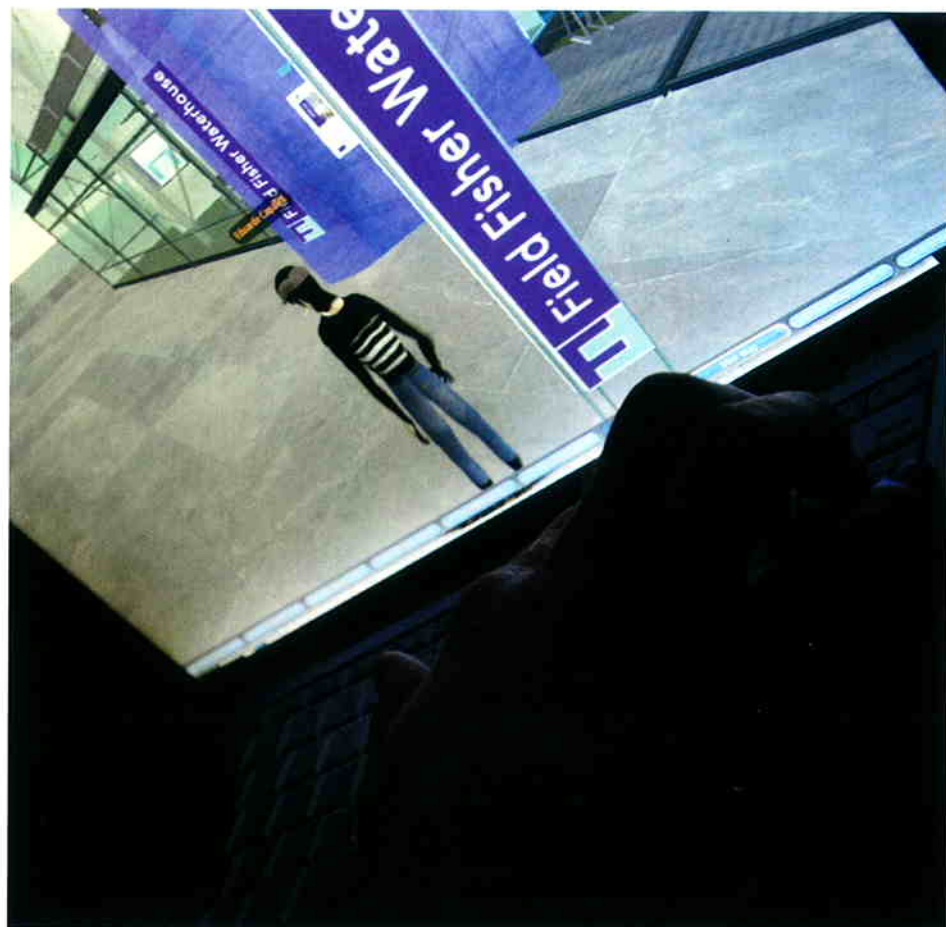
The winner by a short head, however, is a strategic IT consultancy service created for lawyers by lawyers. Developed by Wragge & Co, it is thought to be unique in the breadth and impartiality of the information it provides. The brainchild of Derek Southall, a partner and the head of strategic development, it is free to the company's clients and an important element in the firm's aim of building long-term relationships with its customers.

Mr Southall leads a team of four specialists who are able to advise clients on their IT needs. He argues that many other law firms try to foist their own IT systems on to their clients. If a company regularly uses, say, a panel of nine law firms, it can lead to a confusion of different systems. "What you want is help in sorting out the systems that you really need," he says.

Ian Leedham, senior counsel for the National Grid and an enthusiastic supporter of the Wragge & Co initiative, agrees. He points out that Mr Southall's strength is that he was a lawyer before he became an IT expert: "This means that he really understands what the business needs."

Second place saw Mills & Reeve and Linklaters tied with very different systems. Mills & Reeve has developed an internet-based healthcare resource centre – essentially an easily navigable source of free legal advice on medical matters, which is available to all of its clients. It contains clear guides to over 40 areas of law of importance to National Health Service staff including confidentiality, freedom of information and mental health.

Richard Stringfellow, head of corporate performance for the Worcestershire Primary Care Trust, a Mills & Reeve customer, says financial concerns mean the trust has to manage the access its staff can have to lawyers, so free advice is welcome: "It is



DANIEL LYNCH

## Field Fisher Waterhouse is the first major law firm to open a virtual office in Second Life

well constructed and gives quite a lot of fundamental and sensible advice on various legal aspects."

Linklaters' offering is an automated generator for term sheets, the documents that set out the terms on which a bank is willing to provide finance for a leveraged buy-out. The term sheet, Linklaters says, "is the banks' face to the world and the tool which will win or lose the debt finance mandate". And with LBOs very much in fashion at present, there is intense rivalry among banks to secure the plum deals.

Linklaters says traditional methods of drawing up a leveraged term sheet take eight to 12 hours: its generator, based around an online questionnaire, produces the goods in 30 minutes. Paul Sims, a director of Barclays Capital in London, was initially doubtful. "I was sceptical about their

ability to create something like that, bearing in mind there are so many moving pieces," he says. But he was won round by the end result: "Linklaters invested a lot of time, effort and technical and legal know-how, and on that basis it is a very useful instrument."

Teacher Stern Selby secured fourth place thanks to Graham Shear's audacious stratagem that, against the odds, turned up trumps. As senior litigation partner, he acted for the footballer Ashley Cole in a defamation action against the Sun and News of the World newspapers, which had implied, without actually naming him, that Cole had taken part in "debauched romps".

The problem was how to gather evidence that ordinary members of the public were identifying Mr Cole as the unnamed romping footballer. Mr Shear's flash of bril-

liance was to set up an online questionnaire on a dedicated website. It led to some 83,000 "hits" and, after further investigation, a significant number of statements from witnesses claiming to have identified Mr Cole from the articles. The two newspapers settled the case and published full apologies.

Field Fisher Waterhouse's foresight in becoming the first major law firm to open an office in Second Life warrants special attention. Second Life is a virtual universe, a three-dimensional world in cyberspace inhabited by creatures and scenery of the imagination. Individuals are represented by their avatars, electronic puppets which can walk or fly around their imaginary surroundings.

Second Life, fantastic as it may sound, is important because it is an advanced interface, a step beyond the animated websites we are familiar with today. Companies such as Accenture, the BBC, Calvin Klein and Sony already have a presence in Second Life. Field Fisher Waterhouse says opening an office in the virtual universe

### The chart toppers were distinguished by the fact that they provided volumes of information – sometimes free, sometimes not

"reflects the firm's position advising clients at the cutting edge of online commerce and digital technology". The RSG Research team felt, however, that the initiative was too new and untried to warrant a higher position than "commended" in this year's list.

On the whole, law firms are not noted for technological innovation and this year's entries were, for the most part, sound implementations of the tried and tested rather than – Field Fisher Waterhouse excepted – leaps into cyberspace.

DLA Piper, for example, has developed an internet-based delivery mechanism through which advertising material can be posted by companies for clearance by the

firm's specialists.

Baker & McKenzie has built an intellectual property management system through which its clients can monitor and manage their trademarks. Eversheds has developed an insolvency system to ensure that creditors extract the maximum possible return from the debt while guaranteeing the insolvency practitioner a fair fee.

It is worth pointing out, however, that the chart toppers were distinguished by the fact that they provided volumes of information – sometimes free, sometimes not. Of course, their costs would be absorbed elsewhere in their budgets but it was clear that their clients, conscious of the high fees of consulting live lawyers, welcomed the opportunity to seek out basic information for nothing.

And there was a lot of information available. As Mr Stringfellow at Worcestershire PCT says of Mills & Reeve's health-care resource centre: "As well as being an educational tool, it limits the amount of official, paid-for information we have to get from Mills & Reeve."

#### Information technology category ■ Stand-out ■ Highly commended ■ Commended

Firm name	Name of innovation	Originality	Rationale	Impact	Total	Description
Wragge & Co	Strategic IT advice from partner Derek Southall and team	8	8	7	23	Free consultancy to in-house counsel on technology. Very few law firms are willing to share best practice on IT. Mr Southall is commended for combining legal and IT knowhow to give practical advice.
Mills & Reeve	Free internet-based health-care resource centre covering 40 areas of law	6	8	8	22	Free access for NHS clients to deliver initial legal information so that these clients could streamline questions and instructions more cost effectively. It also improved governance and reduced legal risks.
Linklaters	Leveraged Term Sheet Generator to simplify the documentation on highly complex leveraged buy-outs	7	8	7	22	This gives banks competing on leveraged financings huge time savings. The production of leveraged term sheets has gone down from eight hours to 30 minutes. This thinking software allows for all possible wordings and questions.
Teacher Stern Selby	www.ashleycolesurvey.com: website to gather evidence in libel case of football player	8	7	6	21	This featured use of technology to pursue a litigation claim against the Sun and News of the World. The firm set up an online questionnaire to try to quantify damage. A novel way of gathering evidence.
DLA Piper	SPACE - Sales Promotion and Advertising Clearance Electronically	7	6	7	20	A secure internet-based delivery mechanism through which advertising material can be posted by companies for clearance by DLA lawyers.
Baker & McKenzie	Global IP Management	6	6	7	19	Offers clients a comprehensive way to manage their IP portfolios. It has more than 250,000 trademark records under management.
Eversheds	Consumer Insolvency Service (E-CIS)	7	6	6	19	This helps insolvency practitioners and creditors align their interests so the creditor achieves the maximum return possible from the debt owed. E-CIS guides clients through the voting process.
Simmons & Simmons	Online age discrimination resource	6	7	6	19	Pre-empted changes in the legislation to inform, advise and help clients to take action to deal with them. The resource was accompanied by a communications campaign and traditional methods of training.
Clifford Chance	Online services	5	5	8	18	20,000 users in more than 270 organisations use the CC suite of online training and knowledge products in 50 countries and eight languages.
Field Fisher Waterhouse	Opening an office in Second Life, a virtual world	9	6	3	18	First UK law firm to operate in a virtual world in order to connect to virtual clients. The firm has a leading IT practice and this boosts its understanding of these clients. The initiative also promotes the firm's pro bono work, via its virtual art gallery.
Allen & Overy	Streamlining the management of structured debt programmes	6	6	6	18	Managing legal documentation with a key banking client, reducing the time taken to produce documents on a transaction from three hours to 10 minutes. This was in response to client demand, although the firm came up with the innovation which made it so efficient.
Allen & Overy	Online cross-border guides	5	7	6	18	An online tool to manage cross-border risk which highlights key risks for specific users, across industries and countries, via the delivery of a single web page.