SNOW AND TELL

Investment in new architecture for Tikit's flagship PMS Partner for Windows offers firms multiple options for transforming client services, and a much more agile, flexible and productive operational future, says chief technology officer Mark Garnish

A lot has changed for Tikit since its flagship case and practice management system Partner for Windows (P4W) first hit the shelves in 1998 (the same year, incidentally, that one Google was founded by students Larry Page and Sergey Brin). Today, a team of some 75 Tikit developers have busy heads down, and the fruits of their labours continue to arrive with each new release.

But few Tikit transformations over the years can have created quite as much buzz as the mysteriously named 'Project Snowball', unveiled to both 20-year-loyal and brand-new clients at its National User Group conference back in November 2018.

What could it possibly mean? LPM didn't have too long to wait, as the company's chief technology officer Mark Garnish took to the stage to lead us through the detail and explain exactly why Project Snowball will make a striking strategic difference to the efficiency and innovation efforts of every firm in the room. ('Snowball', incidentally, has no deep symbolism – it was simply a plan concocted in the depths of winter, Garnish laughs).

API ON THE PRIZE

Tikit has always sought to embrace the changing ways that law firms operate, from working more collaboratively with their clients to the acceleration of a 'cloud-first' principle. But the latest picture of progress Tikit saw in the industry called for a significantly more ambitious transformation.

Garnish explained to the audience in his keynote presentation: "Tikit, just like you, needs to think very carefully about the long-term future of the business of law and where technology is going. It's imperative that Partner for Windows remains as effective and popular for the lawyers who will be using it in 10 years' time as it is with all of you today. That means we need to evolve our software to reflect how firms and lawyers want to develop and access innovative new services in the future."

Right at the heart of Snowball, therefore, is the introduction of a comprehensive REST (Representational State Transfer) API. In essence, this allows other developers to integrate and communicate with the P4W system, which gives law firms using it a lot more options.

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the big difference is that if you want to create a new client, you can now create that client from anywhere. Tikit is also using the REST API for its own development of P4W, ensuring that any application interfacing with the database does so in exactly the same way," explains Garnish.

The introduction of the REST API will give users a choice of interfaces, including 'fat client', web application, mobile and third-party integration to the ecosystem.

In other words, this is about the potential for enabling ever more productive working patterns, through managing to do a greater proportion of the firm's workload on the move. We know that demand for 'agile working' is on the rise among a legal workforce that can see it working elsewhere – and firms are also realising that being more mobile can make them more efficient as fee earners embrace new working patterns and seek a better work-life balance.

OPTIONS ARE OPENING

In another major part of the Snowball initiative, Tikit have announced that Partner for Windows will soon be available in the cloud. Tikit remain committed, however, to supporting Partner for Windows both on-premises and in the cloud, and have architected Project Snowball to support both.

"The design of Project Snowball aims to support up to half a million users, as we know this platform needs to be super-secure and resilient, as well as scalable," Garnish explains.

Indeed, he has ended up with a 120-page technical architecture document for users to digest and ultimately endorse.

"On-premises, there's not much visible change – but in the cloud we'll have a new architecture. Rather than one database covering everyone, each user will have their own. There will be a shared set of API services, which will extract the data from the

TIME ARTISTRY

Offering a choice between managing P4W workflows either on-premises or in the Microsoft Azure cloud follows a well-trodden path for the Tikit leadership team. Timekeeping system Carpe Diem paved the way for this level of flexibility, anticipating a growing number of firms moving to a 'cloud first' mindset to increase organisational agility over the years.

But of course, Carpe Diem needs to seize the day as does its younger relatives. The user group heard there are also some significant productivity improvements in store for this product in 2019.

"We're committed to further action to allow Carpe Diem to better serve those law firms committed to legal aid work," says Mark Garnish. And there's also something special for everyone. The latest release includes the ability to auto-populate time fields from recorded notes – or even scribbled handwritten ones that have been deciphered.

"We can all debate the precise meaning of the words artificial intelligence, but one thing for sure is that this development applied to recording notes is really new in the market," says Garnish.

And ultimately, this 'intelligent time' concept is still focused on the end goal of capturing more data on the move, thus driving both the individual's productivity and their business's profitability.

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database and return it to the user."

He continues: "A fat client may be using some of the API services, but you wouldn't notice it at all." And the really big expected win is access via all possible web browsers.

The first of these APIs and web-based interfaces will be ready to roll in November 2019. "Interested early adopters can have access before that, and we'll then invite all clients to upgrade to the new version of P4W, complete with the set of APIs."

Tikit has also announced that a fully functional demonstration site will be available for all P4W users to access from the end of March 2019.

Garnish says: "We're making this available so that we can receive comments and ideas from any of our clients before the final production releases are ready. That way our clients can directly influence the development of the product."

THE USER CASE

But Garnish stresses that in terms of user experience, change will be incremental over time rather than a big bang, making adoption easy. For example, they can drive P4W workflows directly from the firm's own intranet rather than through the current application if that makes more business sense. "Project Snowball is about some really important future-proofing of the underlying architecture, but the end-user experience can be carefully managed."

Meanwhile, another important aspect of 'no change' for law firms reading this will almost certainly be the price tag. "Firms' existing investments in P4W system are 100%, cast-iron protected," says Garnish.

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He says, in addition, there's no additional license cost to upgrade to the new version of P4W.

"We've never charged for upgrades or new versions to date, and we're sticking to that principle – there are few of our competitors that can say that."

Whatever their individual priorities for growth and change, Tikit looks forward to taking firms with them on this forward-looking, future-focused journey. **LPM**

WISDOM FROM THE CROWD

How did Project Snowball sound to the clients represented at the 2018 user group?

Stuart Taylor, head of IT at Osbornes Law (and a user of Partner for Windows since 2001), said he was very enthusiastic about the announcement.

"It strengthens P4W's position as the market-leading practice management system, particularly as I believe the way legal services will be consumed in the future might change dramatically.

"There is a noticeable desire in the world today to do everything via a mobile phone, with as little human interaction as possible. The new API that is the core part of Project Snowball will more easily allow Tikit, or even the practice, to develop mobile apps and websites to allow this to happen.

"It will also allow more agile working solutions for fee earners, as they won't be tied to the remote connectivity solutions we have today. They will be able to interact with P4W from either web browser or mobile app, giving better access to their clients' data as well. In summary, an excellent enhancement to what is already a great PMS system!"

Jamie Abrahams, operations director at Harold Benjamin Solicitors, also saw the value – citing internal collaboration between departments and fee earners as another efficiency driver that should feel the benefit.

"Project Snowball is a positive statement from Tikit, and I believe it will allow for better integration with true cloud technologies and create improved agile and collaborative working methods for our practice."

Finally, Liam Bramwell, IT services administrator at Keebles, singles out the more straightforward integration work itself.

"We already integrate directly with P4W a great deal. However, it's very time-consuming work to do so. With the arrival of Restful APIs we'll be able to perform proper integration without custom code and always use the latest specification."

Keebles was one firm that agreed to take part in a proof-of-concept for the development, using an intranet page that it uses for posting slips. It was an encouraging experience.

"We can see that restful APIs will enable us to implement our own updates for ourselves. We also have other suppliers approach us saying they want to integrate, but need a REST API first. So, now they can.

"More generally, the fact that this is part of a clear long-term plan should give firms confidence in an investment that incorporates all the new ways we know people want to work. If firms were thinking about changing their case management provider, now might well be the time to do it."